TRÄUMEREI

FIONA·DALRYMPLE

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TRÄUMEREI

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THERE WAS A WISTFUL CARESS IN THE VERY TOUCH OF THE LAD'S LEAN, BROWN FINGERS

TRÄUMEREI

By LEONA DALRYMPLE

Author of *Uncle Noah's Christmas Inspiration*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
C. F. PETERS

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TO MY

MOTHER AND FATHER

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There was a wistful caress in the very touch of the lad's lean, brown fingers - - - - *Frontispiece*

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"It is a matter of great mystery to me that the American Signori should have chosen our obscure little valley in which to rusticate." - - - 140

"There is no music like the strains one can bring from a violin of the old master's making." - - - 176

Back in Cremona Camillo Lamberti sat every day in the master's workshop watching the progress of his violin. - - - - - - - - - 186

TRÄUMEREI

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CHAPTER I

A PURCHASE

"AN Italian?"

Kirke Bentley emerged from the hammock beneath the elms and looked inquiringly at the precise valet before him. "What does he want?"

"'E says, sir—" the Englishman coughed respectfully—"'e says as 'ow 'e 'as an old fiddle 'e wants you to look over."

"An old fiddle!" repeated Mr. Bentley, a sudden flash of interest obscuring the chronic discontent of his lazy eyes, "that sounds interesting. Send him out here, Gribbins."

Gribbins' mouse-coloured eyes reflected a faint disgust, but he looked at the broad-shouldered young gentleman in the hammock a trifle uncertainly before he ventured a timid remonstrance.

"I begs your pawdon, sir," he urged primly, "but 'e's dirty, 'e's ragged, and, sir, 'e's exactly like an Anarchist or a Black 'And 'eathen. I told 'im to go about 'is business, but 'e jabbered away so sassy in 'is 'eathenish language and looked so—so ferocious, sir—that I thought

'e 'ad some intentions of doin' me 'arm. Beggin' your pawdon again, sir, I wouldn't trust 'im! You cawn't tell —"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Kirke impatiently. "Send him out here!" and the valet, relapsing into his habitual melancholy, moved slowly away across the lawn. It was not the first time Mr. Bentley's love of music had attracted vagrant musicians whose general appearance had filled the Englishman's sensitive soul with horror, nor, doubtless, would it be the last.

"My word!" mused the scandalised valet, mildly anathematising the young gentleman's democratic ideas. "'E seems right smart, but there is times when I'm sure 'e's orf 'is crumpet —'andsome lad that 'e is — and this is another of 'em. John 'Apworth 'imself would 'ave a 'eap of trouble understandin' 'is queer ideas!"

The Italian was indeed ragged and dirty enough to justify the Englishman's description. There was a supple grace of movement about him, however, that instantly commended itself to Kirke's keen love of the artistic. He was little more than a boy — twenty-two perhaps — certainly no more — with a lean, swarthy face crowned in an unkempt mass of black hair. His sombre eyes seemed unnaturally large, but their dark velvet was soft and melancholy. A red handkerchief, knotted carelessly at the throat, brought out the rich bronze of his skin and lent

the vivid touch of colour that the true Italian loves.

"Il Signore like da musik?" he questioned eagerly as he paused beside the hammock.

"Yes. Do you want to sell your violin? Let me see it."

Kirke examined the violin with a critical eye. The colour of its wood was unusual; a soft, tawny red with a glint of gold in it. He shifted the instrument to get a better effect of its lines of modelling, and as the light changed there was more gold than red, a deep golden-bronze that swiftly crimsoned again at a turn of the wrist. Its beauty of line and colour made a strong appeal, and the Italian, watching him intently, caught the eager interest in his face.

"Il Signore like da instrument?" he queried.

"Yes! Good lines and a fine colour."

"Ah, but da tone!" crooned the Italian proudly. "Listen, Signore!"

Was it the violin or the player? The American could not decide. Certainly there was witchery in the melody that floated away on the warm, summer air from beneath the Italian's bow. It fanned the American's imagination, keenly alive to the stimulus of music, and called up memories of the distant South — the languorous, melting Italian South cradled in the azure bosom of the Mediterranean. The wild minor melody came indeed like a fragrant breath from

the player's own mountains of sunny Italy, whispering of iris-shadowed ridges, of the purling silver foam of mountain cascades, of golden sunsets wrought in Nature's crucible, of orange and lemon and bergamot whose haunting perfume is indissolubly linked with memories of the South.

There was a wistful caress in the very touch of the lad's lean, brown fingers, and the tones that showered from beneath his bow were so full and rich, of such incomparable sweetness and purity, that Kirke half fancied the instrument a sentient thing, alive to the sympathetic emotion of the player and eagerly responsive to it. Gently the Italian drew the bow across the strings in a final diminuendo, and as the low wail of the violin ceased, his mouth quivered strangely and he turned away.

"Play again!" The American's tones were oddly curt. He was a little ashamed of the passionate agitation that had surged through him at the call of a peasant hand.

The Italian nodded. Reverently he drew the bow across the strings in a lingering legato, and a plaintive tone quivered, rose and fell, thrilling Kirke Bentley's soul with wonder. It grew and grew, a thing of mystery, full of passionate rebellion, grew into a contralto melody of powerful timbre and died away to a whisper. A tear coursed slowly down the player's swarthy

cheek and in sudden shame he averted his head.

"I mucha home-seeck, Signore!" he choked miserably.

"Let me have the violin," said Kirke, touched by the lad's simple explanation; and tenderly drawing the bow across the strings, he too played a favourite melody. The magic was not alone in the Italian's fingers; the tone still thrilled with its power and sweetness.

"The Signore can play!" The Italian with the ready buoyancy of the Southerner had composed himself and was nodding approvingly.

"So you want to sell your violin?" Kirke, secretly fearful of the other's retraction, looked inquiringly at the Italian.

"Si, Signore."

"Why?"

"Go back to Italy, Signore! Lova da leetle lady, Lauretta!"

"What price will you take for it?"

"Two hundred dolla."

Kirke whistled, noting the other's hesitant manner. "That's a stiff price for an ordinary violin!" he suggested.

"'Tis no ordinare violin!" denied the Italian proudly. "My familee owna da violin dis mana hundred year!"

This latter statement the American frankly doubted. The violin, however, had pleased his fancy and he was in no mood for a bickering

discussion of its value. Decisions with him were always rapid.

"Very well," he said abruptly. "I'll take it. You're quite sure," he added carelessly, "that you didn't steal it?"

"Si, Signore." The tone was very humble, the eyes downcast; but as Kirke turned away satisfied, a little ashamed, perhaps, of the question in his instant recollection of the honesty he had read in the lad's face, the Italian coloured hotly and looked away.

"Very well. Come up to the house and I'll pay you." Kirke spoke in Italian — the language was a favourite one — smiling at the other's start of astonishment and the eager volubility of his quick response. There was a childish delight in his manner as he eloquently repeated his assurance of the violin's merit, so rapidly indeed that the American threw up his hands in laughing protest.

Gribbins saw the gesture from an upstairs window and, construing his master's conduct as the conventional response to a hold-up, was planning with great deliberation to remove an antique weapon from the wall of the den in which he stood and organise himself into a band of rescue when it was borne in upon his slow wits that the two were approaching the house in friendly converse. But slightly reassured, he descended the stairs in considerable trepidation,

pausing on the landing a disgusted witness to the transmission of a large roll of bills to the hand of the vagrant musician who departed with a simple *"Mille grazie, Eccellenza. Addio!"*

"Addio!"

Kirke watched the Italian depart, mentally approving the lithe grace of his slender body. He turned to find Gribbins behind him, still eyeing the retreating figure with gloomy suspicion.

"Gribbins," he said, with difficulty suppressing a smile, "do you know where the case of my old violin is?"

"Yes, sir," replied the valet, "it's right 'ere, sir, in the music room."

"Very well. You will please put this violin that I've just bought in it. It's going abroad with us."

"Very good, sir." The Englishman took the violin gingerly. To him it had become imbued with the doubtful personality of its former owner and was accordingly an object of suspicion.

"And Gribbins, it's *not* to go with the other luggage, you understand. *You're* to carry it!"

Gribbins' face lengthened perceptibly and his mouse-coloured eyes grew, if possible, more sadly resigned than usual. However the young master's slightest whim must be obeyed.

"Very good, sir!" was all he said — aloud.

CHAPTER II

A DISCOVERY

"THE whole truth of the matter," mused Mr. Bentley gloomily, staring out from his hotel window over the hills of Genoa and moodily apostrophising himself, "is, Kirke Bentley, that you're most infernally lazy! It's a painful truth and you're very sorry, but you don't want to go on to Switzerland to-morrow, and if you hadn't such an ambitious mother and sister, you most certainly wouldn't!"

The young gentleman's eyes roved restlessly over the Italian landscape outside his window, indifferently defining its charm. After all, he told himself discontentedly, the climbing palaces on the heights, the steep streets that wound their serpentine way upward, even the amphitheatre of hills bathed in the golden haze of the early summer did but point the fact that he must leave it all on the morrow to join his mother and sister at Mürren.

Presently, however, the restless beauty of the scene caught him strongly. In certain moods he was keenly alive to the appeal of colour and to-day the slopes of La Superba wooed the idler

with a bewildering maze of tints. Blue, tipped with a delicate rose or a splash of violet, lay over the hills, and the landscape was gloriously mottled with dancing sun-gold. Lazily appreciative, he fancied the scene before him imprisoned upon canvas and, frowning suddenly, turned away to shut out the reproof subtly etched upon the ridges. Unconsciously he shrugged away the thought of an indolence that had been an insidious dormitive to a genuine talent, a talent cultivated by two years of work with the great Salvatore and since wantonly neglected, and in abrupt self-defence, fell to thinking of the summer ahead of him.

Of the cup of travel this discontented young gentleman had drunk full and deep, finding in the dregs of satiety the inevitable bitterness. There had been a time, however, when the fire of an autumn sunset flaming through the branches of a leafless tree, limned stark and dead against a windy sky, or the purple mist of a distant mountain had sent the blood racing through his veins in a fever of exaltation, an artist's passionate worship of the great canvas of Nature. Later, however, as the discontent bred of idleness appeared in his eyes and dulled his finer perceptions, Nature had seemed jealously to veil her deeper beauties, hoarding them for the inspired eyes of the Chosen. Occasionally, in fitful enthusiasm, he could still pierce

the veil and feel for an instant the flood of inspiration, but for the most part he viewed the world with the indifferent eyes of the hardened globe-trotter.

"Heigho!" he yawned presently, "who was it 'called for his pipe and called for his bowl and called for his fiddlers three?' Gribbins, the violin, if you please."

The valet brought the instrument gingerly — it had not yet acquired caste in his eyes — and returned to the adjoining room.

"Mr. Bentley is plumb daffy over that fiddle!" he ruminated disconsolately. "'E's fussed with it the 'ole voyage over and I for one cawn't see what there is about it to so take 'is fawncy. I shouldn't be at all surprised if 'e caught some 'orrible disease through it. I've seen 'im put 'is chin on the very place that Black 'And 'eathen 'ad 'is chin, and 'e not knowin' at all that I rubbed it all over with a disinfectant. Like as not 'e doesn't care! 'E made such a bloomin' row about its smellin' queer the day I did it that I 'adn't the courage to tell 'im!" and Gribbins shook his head ominously as a flood of melody, powerfully sweet and beautiful, poured from the strings of the disinfected violin.

The violin, whatever its collection of bacteria, had indeed strongly caught the fancy of its new owner. The emotion of the ragged,

dark-skinned musician as he had stood beneath the giant elm, evoking a silver shower of melody from his violin, and later plaintively pleading "home-seeckness and love for da leetle lady Lauretta," had imbued the chance purchase with a very definite tinge of romance.

The music died away. Gribbins tiptoed to the door to see if his master wished to dress, but Kirke sat perfectly quiet, the violin in his hand, gazing absently at the circle of hills which, green and tranquil above the climbing line of stuccoed dwellings, lay dark against the gold of the setting sun. The valet silently appraised the dark, clean-shaven face, the lazy eyes and square, defiant chin of his master and as silently retreated. He knew better than to interrupt this mood — he had tried the experiment.

The wind, laden with delicate perfume, blew the curtains of the window softly back and forth. It was redolent with the odour of fruit and flower from the mountainside. Above the glory of the sunset, the sky was streaked with floating streamers of colour — topaz and sapphire — some already deepening into the wistaria pennants of the coming night. From the nearest hillside a mule-bell tinkled audibly in the quiet. The rider's scarlet sash flashed like an intermittent flame as he rode upward through the light and shadow. Kirke's eyes closed drowsily. The scent of orange blowing in at the window was

quite irresistible. A second later when the conscientious Gribbins peered cautiously into the room again, his master was asleep, the violin still clutched in his hand.

From his momentary nap, Kirke was awakened by a dull clatter. The violin had slipped to the floor and lay at his feet. Annoyed by his own carelessness, he stooped to regain it, gasping in dismay as his eyes encountered a gaping hole in its side through which the interior of the instrument was plainly visible. At first sight the violin appeared to have been smashed by its tumble, but a hurried examination revealed the startling fact that the curved piece of wood which formed the indentation in the centre of the violin's side was in reality a concave panel which, swinging back upon a small interior hinge, had been released by the sudden contact of its tiny silver spring with the floor. Kirke, whistling softly in astonishment, stared at the gilded inscription on the inner surface of the curving wood. *Camillo Lamberti, 1712,* it read, and below in brighter gold, *Dioneo Lamberti, Beritola, Italia.* Save for a tiny silver disc, the sole surface indication of the hidden spring, the panel when snapped back into place gave no hint of its secret.

"Fits tightly, of course, so as not to interfere with the sound!" mused the astonished owner, shifting the instrument to inspect the corre-

sponding section of wood on the other side. Instantly he caught the gleam of another silver disc, in every way similar to the first, and, thrilling with electric prescience, pressed it firmly with his thumb-nail. The second panel snapped back, revealing an inscription, which, illumined vividly by the light of the setting sun, seemed made of letters of golden fire. Kirke drew his breath sharply as he read:

Antonius Stradiuarius, Cremonentis,
Faciebat Anno 1712.

It was there — a gripping reality in spite of the American's stare of incredulity. The mark of the immortal master of violin makers followed the magic words — a double circle and the enclosed initials, A. S.

This, then, was the secret of the powerful tones which had so stirred him; of the curious rubescent gold that one caught in its varnish and speedily lost again in the flush of the deeper colour. The peculiar blending of red and gold had been indeed the famous Cremona varnish whose secret formula had died with the old masters who knew so well how to mellow the wood and enrich the tone by its application.

Again the picture of the young Italian rose before him and the strains of the old violin echoed mournfully in his ears. How wonderfully well the lad had played! The reverent

touch of the lean brown fingers took on a new meaning as the American stared at the golden inscription.

A Stradivarius! Genuinely delighted, Kirke ran his fingers lightly over a triangular patch on the back where the varnish had been rubbed off, revealing a wood, fine-grained and soft. Again and again he read the master's name, blessing the lazy whim that had made him the owner of the old violin.

Ah! but was he? The inscription on the other panel recurred to him and he found it uncomfortably suggestive. Who was Dioneo Lamberti? Where was Beritola? What could explain the ragged Italian's possession of so rare an instrument or his willing sale for but a fraction of its value? Suppose — the possibility must be faced — suppose the instrument had been stolen from the man whose name appeared in brighter gold beneath that of his ancestor. Kirke frowned uneasily. There was an excellent case for the defence, he told himself stubbornly. No doubt Signore Dioneo had been dead for centuries! Perhaps the violin had come to him at Camillo Lamberti's death, an event which must have occurred in the eighteenth century.

In spite of his ready argument, however, the absence of any date after the second Lamberti's name and the brighter glint of its golden rec-

ord, suggesting a later application, troubled the American. There was, of course, an equal chance that the owner of the name was alive to-day, and as Kirke recalled the circumstances of his purchase from the Italian peasant, the prospect of theft became ominously plausible.

Moreover, the similarity of the dates following the master's name and that of Camillo Lamberti (1712 in each instance) suggested that the latter had been the original owner of the wonderful instrument which bore his name. If his descendant were alive to-day, and its rightful owner, then the violin must be a precious heirloom that had come down to him from the eighteenth century. Perhaps at this hour — this very instant, indeed! — the Italian was mourning its loss. Impulsively Kirke despatched Gribbins with an inquiry concerning the whereabouts of Beritola. The Englishman presently returned with the information that it was "a walley willage in the 'ills to the north of Naples — that 'e 'ad 'ad a 'ard time findin' out, for the clerk spoke a language that 'e called English but which was in 'is opinion pure Chinese!"

Kirke stared thoughtfully at the distant hills. The warm rose-gold of the sunset was gone now, its aureole of brilliant colour swiftly fading away. Shorn of its vivifying glory, the landscape looked cold and barren and unsympathetic. The American's code of honour, scrupulous in

many details that another would have peremptorily discarded as quixotic, demanded a certain investigation. If Dioneo Lamberti still lived in Beritola and was the owner of this wonderful instrument, stolen from him perhaps by its musical vendor, his duty was quite plain. He must acquaint himself with the history of the violin and, if it corroborated his suspicion, return it, quite unmindful of the personal sacrifice it entailed.

This decision, unpleasant enough at first, grew more attractive at the thought that it afforded an excellent excuse for an immediate withdrawal from the fashionable Alpine diversions of his sister's party. Yes! most certainly he would go to Beritola, find Signore Dioneo if he existed, and make some discreet inquiries. It would be highly interesting and novel, conditions which this whimsical young American always craved. All his former reluctance banished in a wave of enthusiasm, he seized a paper and scribbled rapidly:

MRS. HORACE BENTLEY,
Hotel des Alpes,
Mürren, Switzerland.
Count me out of the Alpine climbing. Am going to Beritola, Italy. Important. Will write particulars.
KIRKE.

"Gribbins," he said as the valet patiently reappeared, "send this telegram at once!"

CHAPTER III

BERITOLA

THE little Neapolitan steamer bound from Genoa to Naples busily chugged its way into the moonlit Vesuvian Bay, a sheet of silver which, stretching ahead to the crescent shore of Napoli, rippled and sparkled with the mirrored radiance of the summer night. Kirke Bentley stood on the deck, feeling mystically attuned to the splendour of the Southern night with its changing lights and shadows. Yes, that great luminous disc above was the same moon that had poured its effulgence down upon the world since the beginning of time, but for Kirke, fired by the novelty of his quest, its shimmer bore a new loveliness. It flecked the waves with lambent silver and turned to ghosts the bare masts of countless vessels riding at anchor in the bay; it traced a Titan filigree of silver, patterned in fantastic shadows, along the coast where it melted into the frothing line of the sea. The torch of the giant sentry Vesuvius flamed suddenly over the bay, and as if in trained response the lights of the city flashed one by one into a half-circle of living sparks, engirdling the

shore with a chain of firefly sentinels, brilliantly armoured.

To the American, in his romantic frame of mind, the scene was irresistible. The moonlit bay, the fire-mountain fitfully reddening against the dusky background of the night, the pervasive tinkle of mandolins and guitars from the smaller boats gliding about the bay, the lights of the city flashing ahead of them like a necklace of fire-jewels as they glided in a row-boat from the steamer to the shore; nay more, the very mission upon which he was bound, hunting the owner of an old violin, ingeniously panelled, which bore inscribed in letters of gold the name of the immortal master, Antonius Stradivarius! All seemed but part of the gossamer structure of a dream, shrouded in an iridescent mist of romance and unreality. What more fitting complements of each other, the American asked himself, than his quest and its moonlit portal?

Kirke's plans were as yet but vaguely defined. In the morning he sought the advice of his hotel-keeper and was instantly assured that *Eccellenza* would certainly find suitable private accommodation in the village of Beritola. Indeed, if he did not, the gracious host stood ready to forfeit his worthless life upon demand, a sentiment sensibly affected by the generosity of the American's *buono mano.*

The dilapidated vehicle recommended by the

hotel clerk for safe portage to Beritola held forth an excellent promise of sudden dissolution as it madly rattled up in the afternoon. Kirke watched the disposal of his luggage in the ramshackle interior with considerable foreboding. Fearful lest the rickety platform should flatly refuse to endure its added burden, he himself presently stepped in, debating with a grin whether it might not perhaps be the saner method to kick out the bottom at once and demand a new one. His fears were plainly reflected in the face of his solemn valet and Kirke smiled broadly at the thought that the precise Englishman would be obliged to ride with the driver — an irresponsible *vetturino* of most rakish aspect, who had gravely introduced himself as the hotel clerk's favourite brother. His flapping hat, in which a dissipated feather bobbed drunkenly about, was tilted gaily over one ear, its general style suggesting nothing so much as the headgear of a scarecrow. A voluminous scarlet tie, in which he displayed a pardonable pride, was carefully spread out in a huge bow beneath his chin, above which grinned a swarthy, dare-devil face, wreathed in an irresistible smile of the utmost friendliness.

Gribbins, however, was quite immune to the picturesque charm of his companion. The rich, bronze skin and even, flashing teeth he regarded as proofs of unusual depravity, and as he settled

his thin figure gingerly by the side of the Italian, he eyed him with such furtive disapprobation that Kirke laughed outright. The driver, after assuring himself that *Eccellenza* was quite comfortable and that none of the component parts of the antique vehicle had as yet tumbled to pieces, suddenly seized the reins and roared:

"Wah! Wah!"

The effect was electrical. Gribbins sprang to his feet, convinced that he was the object of a murderous and totally unwarranted attack, seated himself quite as abruptly as the horses lurched forward, and for the rest of the journey maintained a dignity that was truly awe-inspiring.

But the driver was bent upon sociability. He chattered and grinned and gesticulated cordially to the unresponsive Englishman whose nose in its steady rise threatened to become part of his forehead. The crushing effect of his nasal contempt, unfortunately, was lost in the frequent necessity of dodging the illustrative swoops of the other's whip. The *vetturino,* who seemed indeed a perpetual well-spring of jubilation, was quite undismayed by his companion's silence. He presently launched forth upon a funny story whose ridiculous ending threatened to overwhelm him completely. Indeed it affected him to such an extent that in wild abandon he gave the end of his scarlet tie an hilarious tug and was obliged

to halt his horses to re-tie it. Now perceiving that the Englishman ignored the point even when his master laughed, the driver jocularly dug his elbow into the valet's ribs to sharpen his dull wits, whereupon Gribbins turned upon him a face of such horror-stricken disgust and apprehension that Kirke laughed again. His staid companion's emotion, however, did not quench the Italian. He made a comical grimace of comprehension at Kirke and chattered volubly until the end of the journey, frequently returning to the subject of his horses upon whom he bestowed an extravagant eulogium, designating them proudly as Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel, long ago accorded the palm of being the very best equine stock in all Italy, and possibly in all the world for aught he knew to the contrary!

Gradually the road unwound itself before them, a kaleidoscopic ribbon of beauty, many-hued. Through miniature inland towns, which left a confused impression of the dark eyes, great earrings and brilliant bodices of laughing peasant women, back to the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea; through villages of weather-beaten fishermen it wound, revealing now the grey ruins of a castle and now the gold of an orange grove; now skirting the water's edge, now bounding along shelves of rock far above the sea; a merciful Providence alone protecting the occupants

of the Neapolitan rattle-trap and their reckless driver.

At the side of a hill the driver turned sharply inland, winding in and out through a maze of hills that momentarily grew steeper. The American decided that they were travelling through a range of mountains thrown off from the main branch of the Apennines. This the driver verified with a series of staccato nods that threatened to sever his head completely from the scarlet tie, exploding immediately after into the voluble explanation, accurately illustrated by the whip, that the unbroken line of hills through which he was at present driving and whose scenic vagaries no man in all Italy but himself knew thoroughly owing to the superior moral, physical and mental qualities the acquirement of such knowledge required, extended from the Apennines straight to the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, and that Beritola lay in a wonderful little valley in the very heart of these hills — perhaps a mile, certainly no more, in from the shore.

And such a valley! Body of Bacchus! Wait — *wait* until *Eccellenza* should see it! Fertile? Christoforo Colombo! Yes! The word could not begin to describe it. Peasants who dwelt there were very rich; "but," he added, with a comprehensive shrug of his broad shoulders, "we poor devils who can not even raise money enough to pay our taxes think of Beritola as a Paradise

where the poor man can not only pay his taxes, but live well to boot!" This was apparently such a fabulous state of well-being in the driver's estimation that the contemplation of it rendered him speechless for a second, but he broke forth with redoubled energy at a question from Kirke.

Taxes? Presence of the Devil! Never were there such taxes short of the Nether Regions where His Iniquitous Highness himself levied them! Taxes on all fruit and flesh sold publicly; taxes on all signboards bearing the euphonious names of perfectly respectable merchants; taxes on every box of matches that one's decrepit grandmother sells for such a small sum that *Eccellenza* would willingly feed such insignificant coins to the wild pheasants who were yonder strutting through the thicket.

Per Baccho! A tax on the glorious grapes even while they were growing on the equally glorious vines, the unfortunate owner becoming a double loser if the crop spoiled after the tax was paid. Why! Shades of Garibaldi (and a good man he was too!) if the eloquent opposition to Italian taxes desired to take that empty bottle in the road back to Napoli — he indicated it with a swoop of his whip that grazed Gribbins' ear and made him jump — he would be obliged to pay a tax upon it! No doubt, although *Eccellenza* could see truth emanating from every line of his countenance, and in Napoli he was called

"Truthful Tony," (the owner did not feel called upon to explain that it was usually uttered in tones of admiring sarcasm), no doubt he would find those statements hard to believe, and if the driver had not extraordinary faith in his own unimpeachable integrity, he himself would have similar difficulty.

Kirke tried to check his diatribe with a question about Beritola, but finding to his dismay that it merely served to divert its course into another channel, he sank back again in his seat and shrugged in amused resignation.

Beritola? Blessed Mother! Why, the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of these blessed Beritolians had lived in the very same houses that now sheltered their lucky descendants. Indeed 'twas even said, "Once a Beritolian, always a Beritolian." The driver himself would ask nothing better some day, when he had married his sweetheart, Peronella, than to have a little house in Beritola, but that of course was impossible — quite impossible — owing to a certain conspiracy among the Government heads whose chief object was to see that he made no money, unless he acquired it surreptitiously from the generosity of foreigners.

Kirke smiled at the utter ingenuousness of the veiled suggestion, and the driver, whose success Italian diplomats were striving to impede, feeling that he had delicately intimated his readiness to

accept an enormous *buono mano,* grinned with brazen good-fellowship at Gribbins, flourished his whip in an excess of impudent good nature, and turned his attention to the road which had grown too steep and rough for indifferent driving.

Up the steep slope of a mountain they toiled, threading a precarious course between jutting crags covered with cactus and brier — the vehicle clattering over the rocky ground in momentary danger of collapse — up to a summit crowned with evergreen oaks and carpeted in a velvet of emerald moss and wild-flowers. The driver stopped and pointed far below with the inevitable whip.

"See, *Eccellenza!*" he said proudly. "The valley of Beritola!"

At their feet lay a tiny valley guarded by a circle of hills which rose one above the other as far as the eye could reach. The distant peaks were capped in cloud — Nature's tossing helmet plumes lent to deck the vanguard of the marching mountain files on their way to join the mighty army of the Apennines. The valley lay sleeping in the warm glow of the afternoon sunlight, a vale of oranges and roses, it seemed to Kirke, into whose fertile depths summer, flitting lightly across the rampart of hills, had rained down showers of fruit and flowers in tropical benediction upon her chosen favourite. Near by

on a wooded ridge the towers of an old stone castle, heavily buttressed, loomed grey against the line of sky and forest behind them. A watch-dog, ancient and grim it seemed, guarding the valley at its feet.

Below lay a myriad of tiny gabled houses scattered about among the trees with no thought of symmetry. Their tiled roofs gleamed brightly in the sunlight, dotting the valley with blinding flashes of diamond fire. Rose and jasmine climbed about the porches; fields of grain flashed gold in the sunlight; groves of orange and lemon, heavy with fruit, and olive trees of unusual size and peculiar silvery green filled the intervening fields and occasionally hid the slope of a near-by hill. Peasant women moving about among the trees dotted the landscape with spots of crimson and yellow — a warm riot of colour typically Italian!

Truthful Tony's whip described curves and squares and angles to Gribbins' obvious discomfort as his enthusiasm waxed stronger. Did *Eccellenza* see the lake and the tiny chapel? Holy Mother! Was it not small enough for a dolls' mass? And yet — the driver shook with laughter — they called it the Duomo after the famous Florentine Duomo designed by the illustrious Brunelleschi! Perhaps, if *Eccellenza* looked *very* sharply, he could see the inverted egg-shell upon the roof of the chapel from which

it had acquired its high-sounding title. Mother of God! These Beritolians! They had a world of their own down there. The driver wiped his eyes and by degrees controlled his mirth, although he rumbled intermittently for some time. The American smilingly admitted that the picturesque Duomo and its slender Campanile adjoining were indeed Lilliputian suggestions of Brunelleschi's Florentine Duomo and the famous bell tower of Giotto!

"*Eccellenza* is pleased?" Tony's handsome face was radiant with enthusiasm.

"*Si!*"

For the instant Kirke could find no words adequate to express his admiration of the bit of pastoral loveliness at his feet. With the exception of the castle and a pretentious villa to the left, evidently the country home of some Neapolitan aristocrat, there was no evidence of any life in the valley save that of the prosperous peasant. The soul of the artist was revelling in the rich colour, the light and shade, the dim perspective, and the vanishing point of sky and cloud and misty mountain.

"It's wonderful!" he added later, "wonderful, wonderful!"

The driver flashed his even white teeth in a grin of delight and looked suggestively at Gribbins, who was staring straight down the steep mountain road ahead of him, speculating in

melancholy apprehension upon the approaching dissolution of the cart. Tony instantly evinced symptoms of a desire to stimulate his companion's appreciation with the butt end of his whip — indeed it was headed for its goal when Kirke intervened with a hasty question — and starting violently, Gribbins stared in alarm at the madcap Italian. Finding Tony's bold, dark eyes fixed impudently upon his face, however, he coughed behind his hand in considerable embarrassment. Reassured an instant later by a wild explosion of mirth from the Neapolitan who appeared to have been suddenly and completely overwhelmed by the Englishman's appearance, he offered uncertainly:

"Mr. Bentley, 'e *is* a queer one and the cart is a 'eap worse! My word, sir, but it *is* an 'eathenish outfit."

"Wah! Wah!" roared Tony maliciously, grinning like a fiend in the delight of starting up Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel with the call that had once before startled his solemn companion, and swaying back and forth in his seat in another uncontrollable outburst of laughter as the Englishman jumped. Down the hill they bounced and clattered, and as the driver's mirth subsided, he informed Kirke that the road they were travelling was the sole entrance to the little valley of Beritola.

A crowd of youngsters with tousled curls and

great, soft, dark eyes ran out to greet the visitors with screams of delight. The arrival of a stranger in Beritola was epoch-making, and it would be no fault of theirs if he were not properly received. The village women, too, emerged from their houses, calling out eager questions to the driver, who, recognising a national trait in their artless curiosity, never suppressed by any false consideration for its object, patriotically called back all known details and a few others relative to *Eccellenza's* startling wealth and lineage.

Kirke had long ago succumbed to the irresistible personality of the rakish Italian. Now he grinned in delight at the driver's brazen, good-natured discussion of his fare, secretly astonished at the details which Truthful Tony, sublimely indifferent to the adjective prefixed to his name, imparted with an air of the utmost satisfaction and a firm belief in their accuracy. It was quite evident that the Neapolitan exponent of the truth was thoroughly enjoying himself, and Kirke sank limply back in his seat, laughing in secret enjoyment. The inquisitive progeny of the valley, deeply sensitive of the unusual honour conferred upon them by this visit, speedily organised themselves into a reception committee delegated to escort *Eccellenza* wherever he was going. To Gribbins' horror, they followed the cart up the valley, a constantly growing cav-

alcade, good-natured and admiring, dodging the mockingly threatening swoops of Tony's whip and making frank overtures of friendship to the strangers.

"I know Manuel Ciapelletto, Signore," volunteered Tony, turning to Kirke. "He once took a great English author to live with him during the summer, a person of most unchristian stinginess. Perhaps I may drive *Eccellenza* there? 'Twas I — alas! — who brought the author."

Assured of *Eccellenza's* ready assent, the voluble Italian once more broke forth into an admiring rhapsody, proudly indicating the picturesque hedges of aloes and pomegranates that enclosed the gardens, the miniature vineyards and the tethered goats as if they in a measure reflected infinite personal credit upon himself.

"They are very independent, *Eccellenza,* these Beritola men and women!" he observed in conclusion. "They make their own wines, they have their own goats that give the milk, they grow the vegetables and the fruits and"— he chuckled and winked prodigiously —"they pay the very big tax to the Government for their blessings, but Holy Mother! they can afford it!"

With a final brandish of his whip that was greeted with whoops of delight from the juvenile reception committee, Tony pulled up before a

tiny house whose porch was over-run with a shower of crimson roses. He alighted in the midst of the gaping youngsters with a spring, and roared, "Manuel! Manuel!" in a voice calculated to summon the master of the house from any distance. Its force was only equalled by its mysterious suggestion that Manuel's destiny had in some way been altered by his benevolent intervention. A tall, well set up Italian, whose loose peasant blouse and jacket revealed a bronzed throat and broad muscular frame, emerged from the cottage and returned the driver's greeting with a good-natured nod. Tony straightway burst into a frantic babble of explanation at which Manuel, with a quick glance at the American to see if he resented the driver's volubility, laughed aloud. Kirke caught his eye and smilingly shook his head.

"You can't stop him!" he said in Italian. "I've tried!"

Tony slapped his knee in the delight of the discovery that the American Signore had so quickly come to understand his little idiosyncrasies.

"Holy Mother!" exclaimed Manuel, coming nearer. "'Tis only too true, *Eccellenza;* Tony is the prize liar of Napoli. He only goes to confession when he breaks his record and tells the truth!" By the friendly twinkle in his eyes as he spoke the American guessed that the irre-

sponsible owner of the rickety cart was a favourite.

Tony tried to look reproachful, failed dismally, and joined in the laugh at his expense with a roar of delight. He seemed immensely proud of his reputation.

"*Eccellenza* wishes to see the English author's rooms," nodded Manuel, perceiving that Tony appeared to be on the border of another excited explanation —"Lauretta, Lauretta!"

There was a movement at the latticed front window as if the owner of the name had been peeping, then a slender girl, clad in a short red skirt and bodice with a blue apron trimly tied at her waist, stepped from the house, shyly fingering a rosary. Tony greeted her with a low flourishing bow, swooped his hat through the dust in the enthusiasm of his obeisance, and gravely brushed the ragged feather immediately afterward with an air of the utmost concern.

The American, however, startled by the extraordinary picture before him, stared at her in undisguised astonishment. The beauty of the peasant girl was as rare as it was wonderful. Moreover, she was a type quite her own, in no way resembling the type of fair-haired women commonly seen in Southern Italy. Her waving hair was half gold, half red; the blending of the two perhaps into an exquisite ruddy gold. Her eyes? Kirke frowned in the quick effort to

analyse their colour. No! of course they could not possibly be red — who ever heard of red eyes? — but certainly there was a hint of its rich glory in their tantalising depths. At least they were a rare blending of red and brown and gold changing with her moods. They were long and oval and Oriental-looking, the silken lids delicately veined and fringed with lashes of black, the arched brows above them traced in jet against the clear, colourless olive of her skin.

"Lauretta," said Manuel Ciapelletto, "show the American Signore the two upstairs rooms that the great author used." He turned to Kirke in quick apology. "We have no inn, *Eccellenza*. Few visitors find their way to Beritola."

Kirke was grateful for the Italian's ready acceptance of his own arrival. The rampant curiosity of the village women had made him somewhat apprehensive. Manuel accepted without question the American's hearty praise of the valley and his intimation that Tony's alleged brother, the hotel clerk, had recommended it as an ideal spot for rest and quiet.

"*Eccellenza* will find plenty of that!" he smiled, and turning, motioned Lauretta to lead the way inside.

Kirke followed, quite prepared to accept whatever hospitality the house should offer. The valley had cast a magic spell over him and enthralled his senses. Fruit and flower and south-

ern sky, warm and glowing, sent the blood leaping through his veins in a fever of admiration. He paused on the threshold of the cottage and drew in deep breaths of the fragrant air, an invisible incense heavy with perfume. In the powerful music of the great organ of Nature he found no dissonance to mar the harmony of her blended beauty. The people pleased him. Nature had breathed into them the spirit of the valley. They were all simple and natural, quick, hot-blooded, impulsive children of the sun that shone so fiercely above them. Tony's impudent good-nature, Manuel's quiet humour, the artless curiosity of the villagers — they were all typical of a life that would never grasp the meaning of conventional restraint.

Was Dioneo Lamberti the master of the ancient castle yonder guarding the gabled village at its feet? Was he the rightful owner of the priceless violin whose golden inscription had led the American to this Italian Arcadia, revealing a beauty that stirred the innermost depths of his Nature worship? Verily his quest and the ultimate goal were fittingly complemental!

The rooms which the great author of unchristian stinginess had honoured with his literary presence were in accordance with the prevailing custom of the Italians in summer, uncarpeted and roughly paved in brick. Their rude mural frescoes attracted Kirke in proportion to their

contrary effect upon Gribbins, who eyed the representation of a hairy, grotesque Bacchus on the wall opposite him in silent horror. The valet's last vestige of hope incontinently fled when his master smilingly nodded his approval. Numbed by the young gentleman's successive eccentricities, he haughtily descended the stairs to attend to the luggage, groaning within himself as he deposited his own portmanteau in the rear room, not, however, before he had carefuly dusted the floor with a newspaper. He must now remain in Beritola until Mr. Bentley chose otherwise, for nothing short of the personal intervention of the devil himself could compel him to ride back to Naples with that grinning fiend of a driver. The gross familiarity of Tony's prodding elbow still rankled.

Below stairs Tony was preparing to depart, his heart gladdened by a *buono mano* whose size would have made the inimical court diplomat shiver enviously. He had bowed and scraped his gratitude in a series of evolutions so intricate that Kirke had doubted his ultimate ability to disentangle himself. The aggravated angle of his hat attested his increased well-being. An inquiry concerning the mail facilities elicited the astounding information that Italy was vastly superior to all other countries in this respect, making an especial point of accelerating all material addressed to Americans. True, *Eccellenza's*

mail would come no further than Napoli, but although Tony was a very busy man (and this remark received a tacit confirmation in its peculiar effect upon Manuel who seemed loath to let it pass without some endorsing comment of his own), Tony himself, for a slight consideration which he would leave entirely to the magnanimity of his employer, would depart from his recent resolution to be very careful of his strength this hot summer and each morning, if *Eccellenza* so desired, he would drive over and deliver the written communications of *Eccellenza's* admiring friends. Kirke arranged for a liberal supply of newspapers and magazines, of whose literary merits the versatile driver professed an expert knowledge and rare powers of discrimination, and having completed arrangements for outwitting those small-minded statesmen who were conspiring against Tony's financial welfare, watched the breezy Italian drive off with a deafening clatter of bolts and boards. The American turned to find Manuel smiling broadly.

"*Eccellenza,*" he chuckled, with an expressive shrug, "I once rode over from Napoli in Tony's cart. *Per Baccho!* 'Tis a gamble!"

With a light laugh, Kirke bounded up the stairs to his room, peering from his front window with an exclamation of delight. Framed in the casement lay a mediæval sketch of castle

and hills, hills whose summits, rising one above the other, were veiled in mist and purple shadows. Off to the south a curling cloud of smoke capped Vesuvius. Dioneo Lamberti might or might not exist, the American told himself jubilantly, the charm of the little valley remained the same!

Suddenly conscious of an unnatural silence in the rear room, Kirke left the window. He found Gribbins seated upon the edge of his bed sunk in a lethargic gloom. He was moodily inspecting the frescoes on the wall as his master entered.

"It's no use, sir," he quavered, "I cawn't get used to them circus pictures. I'm trying 'ard, but the werry thought of wakin' to be-'old 'em fills me with 'orror! To me, sir, they're neither ornamental or decent. 'As an artist 'ad this room, sir?"

Briefly Kirke explained the Italian's mania for frescoes. "That's Proserpine and Ceres and Pluto," he added, "and there's the fatal pomegranate"— but the valet merely sniffed his ignorance of the old myth, adding in deep disgust, "Ooever they are, sir, the female 'as not enough clothes and that 'orrible monster with 'orns is no sight for a man comin' out of a sound sleep!"

In truth, the artist's conception of Pluto was almost as weird and terrible as it was original,

and the sanguinary pomegranate suggested a recent murder. Kirke wheeled in quick authority as the Englishman once more expanded into a querulous jeremiad.

"See here, Gribbins," he exclaimed sternly, "you must make the best of matters or get out, understand? The driver will be back in the morning with some things from Naples, and if life becomes unbearable by that time, you can return with him and I'll pay your passage back home."

Gribbins promptly announced in quavering tones that "'e 'ad no intention of leaving, sir," and to himself he added that he had no intention of giving that Neapolitan cut-throat, Tony, the opportunity to murder him and "make off with his waluables!" The "waluables" in question consisted of a ponderous watch-chain of English shillings, a highly valued heirloom from his grandfather which hung in cumbrous state from pocket to pocket. He returned to the unpacking of his master's luggage in a state of acute melancholy, presently following the young gentleman down to supper with a gingerly precision of movement indicative of complex emotions.

A table of pine boards, scrubbed to the shining point, lay invitingly spread with brown earthenware. To the American the vivid colouring of the fruits that lay heaped upon it typified the spirit of exuberance that dwelt in the valley.

The rich purple of the fig, the scarlet of the enormous cherries, yes! the crimson, too, of the roses brimming over the side of a brown bowl and of the blazing poppies — there was no restraint in their tropical glory. The fierce heat of the sun that had fostered them knew no tempering. Its scorching rays had left an imprint of intensity upon fruit and flower and human blood.

Manuel's wife, an energetic little woman, brown as a nut, with a faded remnant of the beauty that had been Lauretta's inheritance, hurried back and forth bearing savory platters from the kitchen. These Gribbins eyed with discreet indecision before he proffered them to his master, inwardly condemning the avidity with which that young gentleman ate the strange concoctions, apparently with no thought of analysing them!

Kirke smoked a thoughtful pipe on the little porch while the Englishman mincingly partook of his own supper. The dusk was creeping down from the hills, slowly veiling the valley in a sombre mist. One by one the lights of the cottages leaped up, dotting the purple twilight with points of fire. A thrill of exaltation surged through the American, born of his reverence for the beauty of the valley and excitement at the peculiar train of events that had led him to it.

The hours fled by one by one in the fragrant

darkness, but Kirke still sat on the cottage porch, lazily content. The breeze that came down from the mountainside laden with suggestions of oranges and pine brought with it the sounds of the night, the soft twang of a guitar, the music of an accordion, or an occasional plaintive voice raised in minor melody. Off to the south glowed the fitful pillar of fire that crowned the Neapolitan volcano by night.

Some instinct of caution had withheld the American's immediate inquiry for Dioneo Lamberti. Now as he gazed up at the twinkling lights of the old castle with keen interest, he reflected that its grim grey walls might harbour the very man he sought. In swift review he questioned again the identity of the Italian lad as the scene beneath the elms back home rehearsed itself bit by bit, and in a sudden flash of revelation, as vivid as a lightning dart cleaving the heavy darkness of the summer night, he heard again the Italian's plaintive words:

"Go back to Italy. Love da leetle lady, Lauretta!"

Kirke rose abruptly, a curious light in his eyes. Had the fellow meant Lauretta Ciapelletto? If so, the discovery was fraught with meaning. The Italian lad had come from the little village whose name was inscribed in letters of gold on the panel of the Stradivarius. Vainly the American pieced together the little informa-

tion in his possession. The corresponding dates following the names of Camillo Lamberti and the master; certainly they must indicate that the violin had come into the Lamberti family immediately upon its completion. That other name of more recent application — the family name still unchanged, suggesting a treasured heirloom. The peculiar formation of the instrument with its gold lettered panels luring the American to this wonderful little valley of Beritola, the home, perhaps, of Dioneo Lamberti and the homesick Italian exile and certainly of Lauretta Ciapelleto. And last of all this curious coincidence of names! Was the beautiful little Italian girl the vagrant musician's "leetle lady, Lauretta"? In the light of all this, Kirke was inclined to answer in the affirmative, and the ragged exile's one time presence in the valley seemed very significant!

CHAPTER IV

LAURETTA

KIRKE arose long before the patient Gribbins had opened his eyes upon the horned horror on the opposite wall, dressed quietly and crept downstairs. The front door stood wide open. Outside he met Manuel's wife coming down the valley, her lean, brown fingers firmly spread upon her hips to balance the weight of an enormous bundle of dry twigs which she carried upon her head with apparent ease, although the weight was evident in the tremulous vibration of her long ear-rings.

"*Madonna mia!*" she exclaimed, her wrinkled brown face expanding into a grin at the sight of the American. "*Illustrissimo* leaves his bed early. See, the valley still sleeps. None but I and the accursed *pecorajo* yonder rise to fight for twigs for the morning fire!"

She hurled a fierce imprecation at a figure whose bundle of twigs seemed to be considerably smaller than her own. He in turn shook his fist at his antagonist who screamed a parting malediction back at him and turned to Kirke.

"*Povero asinaccio!*" she burst forth in sub-

lime scorn, her dark eyes flashing fire, "each morning we fight. There are twigs in plenty, but still we fight, and I, Marietta, always win!"

Kirke, somewhat mystified by the inexplicable rancour of the pair, since there were undoubtedly "twigs in plenty," ascribed it to the fierce little brown woman's apparent love of excitement, and, smiling broadly at her irresponsible method of gratifying it, offered the suggestion that it relieved the monotony of the morning. Marietta's dark eyes twinkled shrewdly and she laughed outright. *Illustrissimo's* frank, good-natured shaft, with its kernel of truth, pleased her, indicating as it did an understanding of the fever of excitement that burned in her veins and constantly sought expression. Tingling as the morning breeze swept down from the mountain-side full in his face, Kirke strode on up the valley.

The gabled village lay in a glow of gold poured down from the east where, in the regal splendour of his rising, the Sun King had paused on the crest of a mountain before ascending his brilliant trail of heat. The dew upon the orange trees flashed in the sunlight with changing opalescence, emerald and rose and gold imprisoned in a treasure house of crystal. Here and there golden envoys of the Sun King crept down over a terraced mountain of orange, caught the sparkle of the dew, and

transformed the mountain into a grove of jewels. To the ready fancy of the American, the ancient towers of the castle stretched along the ridge ahead of him, lay against the azure of the sky like a mammoth cameo clearly cut!

Marietta's assertion that all the valley but she and the accursed *pecorajo* still slept proved to be quite true. Turning to the left in his walk, the American presently found himself confronting the villa he had glimpsed from the top of the hillroad. The house itself gleamed white and cool from a file of trees and shrubbery. Showers of jasmine climbed about the pillars of the portico, freighting the air with peculiar fragrance. In the terraced gardens beyond statues of famous Italians flashed white against a background of cypress and ilex. A thick hedge of scarlet geraniums enclosed the grounds like a line of flame. As the wind stirred their petals, they seemed like blazing tongues of fire kindled into crimson by the burning rays of the sun. Kirke whimsically chose to see in this fancied line of fire about the villa a quaint significance.

From the trellised walks and marble balustrade to the fountain whose splash was startlingly audible in the silence of the early morning, the grounds were loyally Italian in conception. In spite of Nature's kindly veil of vine and shrubbery, however, the villa betrayed a

need of repairs, and the outbuildings, leaning crazily, seemed in imminent danger of collapse.

Reluctantly, for the artistic appeal of the old villa had been strong, Kirke walked on, past the school-house to the lake, a placid sheet of water mirroring the line of foliage on its banks and the chapel whose eggshell Duomo had excited Tony's good-natured ridicule. The shadow of the slender bell-tower lay across the lake like a long, dark finger tracing on a silver page the record of the sun. On the shore in a thicket of trees lay the chapel, so near the water's edge indeed that its rude platform of stones had been worn to smoothness by the rippling of the lake.

With a sigh of infinite content Kirke seated himself on the opposite bank, idly tracing the tapestry of light and shadow at his feet. Whimsically he leaned forward with a smile at the fancy to look for the lovely lake Nereid who had woven the magic strands into a pattern of reflected tree and sky and chapel. Perhaps she would reveal to him something of Signore Lamberti!

If the water nymph had any intention of disclosing herself to the inquisitive American peering down into her crystal retreat, however, it was destroyed in embryo by a heavy footstep so lacking in romance, so utterly unimaginative, and diffusing such an atmosphere of square toes and common sense that the very echoes rang

mockingly across the lake. Kirke turned to behold Gribbins, breathless and anxious, eyeing his master in considerable perturbation.

"I begs your pawdon, sir," he gasped, "but I arsked that Marietta where you 'ad gone with the sign language that John 'Apworth taught me, and she laughed like a bloomin' 'eyeena — gibbering away so sassy, sir, that I was sure they 'ad done away with you already. I 'unted till I found you, sir."

Kirke laughed. "And breakfast?" he suggested.

"Ready, sir. I gathered that from Marietta's wicious motions."

Kirke breakfasted in his own room at a small table drawn up at his request to the window. Off to the south, where the pillar of fire above Vesuvius had glowed and faded in the darkness, a plume of silvery smoke rolled and curled like a summer cloud. Lauretta, as fresh and pretty as the roses she heaped in a bowl on the table, darted back and forth at the excited commands of Marietta, delivered in shrill screams from the bottom of the stairs.

"Lauretta!"

"*Si, madre.*"

"The *padrone's* cherries! *Madonna mia!* You've forgotten them again. Did I not tell you —"

"*Scusi, madre.* I could not carry all."

"Hurry. I weary of holding them. Madonna! how slow you are!"

"Lauretta!"

"*Si, madre.*"

"The *padrone's* table. Is it by the window?"

"*Si.*"

"On the left?"

"No, *madre,* on the right!"

"Mother of God! I said the left!" There was a rapid creaking of stairs and Marietta appeared, alert and vivaciously competent. Laughingly, Kirke asserted his entire satisfaction with everything, and, having assured herself by a deft rearrangement of the table, the tense little brown housekeeper hurriedly departed to the lower floor, where they heard her fiercely berating Manuel because that "accursed goat was in the cabbages again!"

Smiling at the commotion that immediately arose in the cabbages, Kirke turned from the contemplation of the castle's towers and ramparts to find Lauretta gazing intently at him — a curious look in her long, red-brown eyes.

"*Eccellenza* wishes anything else?" she inquired, with a start of confusion as his glance encountered her own.

"No, I think not. Oh, yes," he added, with assumed carelessness, "who lives in the castle yonder?"

"Count Teodoro di Gomito, Signore."

Kirke was conscious of a genuine thrill of disappointment. The castle had seemed an eminently fitting abode for the owner of the old Stradivarius.

"*Eccellenza* comes from Am-er-i-ca?" suddenly questioned Lauretta, her gaze full upon him.

"Yes."

The girl drew closer, her eyes ablaze with eagerness.

"Un-i-ted States of Am-er-i-ca?" she questioned.

"Yes."

"It — it is a very big place?"

"Well, yes, it's fairly sizable."

With the American's keen eyes upon her she seemed to hesitate for an instant, then she bent impulsively toward him, a wave of red mantling the clear bronze of her skin. To Kirke's secret astonishment she was trembling with excitement.

"*Eccellenza* has perhaps seen Pietro in that far country?" she burst forth eagerly.

"Pietro?" Kirke knit his brows in thoughtful review, a bit of acting to mask the quick gleam of interest in his eyes. Lauretta's limited comprehension of the distant country's size evidently did not preclude the possibility of universal acquaintanceship. Her question had

instantly brought back the scene beneath the elms at home and the Italian lad's plaintive confession of his love for the little lady Lauretta!

"*Si, Signore.* Pietro Masetto. He left Beritola eight months ago and went to the *Signore's* country across the sea. *Eccellenza* has heard of *Nuova York?* See," she went on in growing excitement, "I have here a letter from Pietro." She pulled a worn, dirty letter from her bosom and pointed to the postmark. It had grown indistinct in its long journey, but the word New York was still visible. Kirke returned the letter, convinced of the absent Pietro's identity. Caution forgotten in a reckless impulse, he turned to the girl.

"Would your Pietro be likely to be interested in violins?" he queried, and instantly regretted his imprudence. Lauretta's beautiful face flamed red and two ominous points of gold fire glittered in her wonderful eyes.

"No! No! *Signore,*" she cried fiercely, "you shall not say that!" She clenched her hands and passionately stamped a small foot until the breakfast table clattered with the vibration. "You shall not! I say, you *shall* not!" A flood of angry tears followed the fiery outburst.

"*Scusi, Signorina!*" Kirke was profoundly apologetic. He was thunderstruck at the girl's tempestuous revelation of defiant fear and loyalty. "I once knew a Pietro in New York

who kept a violin store," he added, lying gracefully. To assure the girl of his utter indifference he looked carelessly from the window, frowning in disgust at his own thoughtless blunder. A belated caution whispered that it would be most unwise to arouse suspicion, particularly in this girl who had been in touch with the exile and was probably cognisant of his affairs.

"A violin store, *Eccellenza?*" questioned the girl. She was calmer now. At the American's ready explanation she had flushed hotly, biting her lips in the effort of self-restraint.

"Yes, on lower Broadway." Kirke recalled a quaint little shop whose dusty collection of instruments had often attracted him, and described it with enthusiasm, unblushingly christening the unknown proprietor "Pietro" with every appearance of unimpeachable veracity.

Lauretta wiped the tears from her dark lashes, with a covert glance at the American.

"*Scusi, Signore!*" she offered lamely in self-defence, "my heart aches for Pietro."

"A poor excuse for such an outburst, my little friend!" reflected Kirke, but aloud he said, "don't worry, *Signorina!* It isn't your Pietro who keeps the violin store. He's been there for the last ten years. Your Pietro is probably sailing back to you. Passage money," he added mentally, "paid out of my two hundred!"

"*Si, Signore.* Pietro says in his letter that when he has saved the money he will come back to me," admitted the girl, hurrying away at a frenzied summons from Marietta.

The American finished his breakfast in thoughtful silence. The events of the morning had resulted in one very strong conviction. Lauretta Ciapelletto was the sweetheart of the vagrant Italian from whom he had purchased the Stradivarius. What, though, was the meaning of the storm of passionate tears with which she had greeted the mere suggestion of his interest in violins? Did she know the history of the strange instrument securely hidden away in his trunk? Certainly there was more than coincidence in this curious revelation of the morning.

Idly he watched the girl return, idly watched the appointments of the little breakfast table one by one disappear. One question lay uppermost in his mind and impatiently he debated the wisdom of voicing it. Lauretta had paused on the threshold to make quite sure there had been no domestic oversight in the ordering of *Eccellenza's* room. Reflecting that it was an inquiry any curious stranger might make and that his own hesitancy was but the result of a hazy suspicion, Kirke lazily arose and flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"One minute, Lauretta," he said carelessly

as she turned to go. "Who lives in the beautiful old villa with the jasmine growing over it and the hedge of red geraniums around the grounds?"

The girl faced him with startled eyes that were swiftly veiled by long lashes — then she answered calmly enough:

"Signore Dioneo Lamberti, *Eccellenza.*"

CHAPTER V

"THE LADY OF THE LAKE"

MARIETTA'S morning altercations with her "accursed *pecorajo*," ending as they usually did in a burst of glory under his very window, proved an amusing source of information for Kirke in the week following his mystifying interview with Lauretta. At first he had sleepily resented the intrusion of their shrill voices and ended by growing interested in their bickering gossip. Each morning the rival twig-gatherers impartially discussed the happenings in the little valley for the sole purpose, the listening American decided, of arraying themselves indiscriminately upon opposite sides. They taunted each other furiously on subjects which to Kirke seemed of interest to neither.

"The *Signorina* Beatrice, Heaven be praised! will be home this week!" announced Marietta one morning in challenging tones.

"She will not!" came in decided tones from the opposition.

"*Madonna mia!*" screamed Marietta, "my Lauretta goes each day to the villa to work! She *knows*—"

"Your Lauretta," declared the *pecorajo* im-

perturbably, "knows nothing! I, too, go to the villa to work in the garden when I may leave my sheep."

Marietta instantly exploded into a vituperative storm of words that rained madly down upon her antagonist's head for several seconds, concluding very decidedly, "I tell you, Niccolo, the *Signorina is* coming. Our *padrone* at the villa has said it!"

"Count Teodoro di Gomito will be glad!" observed Niccolo in the tone of a man who sees his way to give further offence.

"The Count Teodoro is a fat pig!" There was infinite scorn in Marietta's voice.

"Nevertheless the *Signorina* Beatrice will marry the fat pig," asserted Niccolo with a laugh. "*Per Baccho!* What matters it, my friend, if one is a fat pig if he has a title, much money, a castle, and can marry a beautiful daughter of the Lambertis'." The *pecorajo* at times became acutely philosophical, well-knowing that it goaded his rival to a reckless frenzy.

"Marry *Count Teodoro?*" Marietta laughed mockingly. "Niccolo, you are mad!" She lowered her voice though it still remained perfectly audible. "Wait, wait until she sees the handsome American! Holy Mother, he is hung with gold pieces!" Kirke grinned at the frank statement.

Niccolo asserted his unqualified approval of the "handsome American who was hung with gold pieces," and Kirke immediately sat up in bed alert for the answer. As he had expected, Marietta, stung into the necessity of contradiction, flatly denied all the American's claims to admiration and excitedly catalogued a mythical list of his shortcomings remarkably inconsistent in the light of her usual friendly solicitude for his welfare.

"And Mother of God! How he does eat!" she exclaimed in conclusion.

Impulsively Kirke leaped out of bed and leaned from the window.

"And so, Marietta," he said reproachfully, struggling to maintain an impressive gravity, "that's the way you feel about it, is it? I'm ugly, and disagreeable and eat too much."

"*Madonna mia!* No!" she exclaimed fiercely, flinging out her arm in dramatic denial. "*Illustrissimo* knows better, but —" she pointed an accusing brown finger at Niccolo —"must I not give him the lie always?"

Kirke withdrew his head with a chuckle of delight and returned to bed, whence he heard Marietta continuing in vindictive tones, "Niccolo, you have made trouble for me with the *padrone!* You, too, are a fat pig, a lying beast, a thief! You —you would rob the suckling pig of his mother to make a pork pie! You — you

would —" she paused to find some disgraceful accusation in keeping with the utter depravity of her antagonist and finished triumphantly, "you would steal the name plate from your grandmother's coffin!"

"Why not?" came the philosophical retort; "it might be silver! At least, Marietta, I do not steal *violins!*" and with this parting taunt, Niccolo strode up the valley, mockingly singing the verse with which he always ended the morning disputes.

"'*Addio, mio caro amore,*
Un amplesso, e poscia addio,
Non v'ha pena, non v'ha dolore.'"

This proceeding as a rule aggravated Marietta to the point of desperation, but this morning she received it in utter silence. Kirke heard her enter the house and viciously bang the door. He himself was considerably startled by Niccolo's final words, implying, as they did, a knowledge of the subject that lay uppermost in his own mind.

Bit by bit from the morning wrangles, Kirke gleaned a store of facts that he would have hesitated to acquire by questions. Lauretta's passionate outburst and Niccolo's taunt had taught him the need of caution. Dioneo Lamberti's name was frequently mentioned and al-

ways in a tone of reverential affection. It was the one subject upon which the rival twig-gatherers seemed agreed, a mighty tribute in itself. His passion for music, his secluded life in the villa with his adorable old sister, the *Signorina* Emilia, and his daughter Beatrice, Count Teodoro di Gomito's rumoured suit; gradually the Lamberti biography, tantalisingly incomplete, unfolded itself in the early hours of the morning. Marietta expanded handsomely upon the virtues of her "beloved *padrone*" and his family in whom she asserted an aggressive proprietorship by reason of the Lambertis' domestic dependence upon Lauretta's daily trips to the villa. Kirke suspected that Count Teodoro, whom Marietta irreverently designated upon all occasions as "the fat pig," was hated and feared in the valley in proportion to the love and respect inspired by the musician, an opinion graphically confirmed by Tony.

Keenly interested in the man whose personality had won for him such affection and homage, the American daily planned his walks to include the villa, eager for a glimpse of the musician whose name was inscribed in the Stradivarius. His efforts were unavailing. Either his selection of a walking hour was unfortunate or Signore Lamberti never left the interior of his villa. Kirke devised endless plans to invade his privacy, plans that speedily mocked him

with their utter impracticability. Back in Genoa it had seemed but a delightful bit of romantic adventure to visit Beritola and present himself to Signore Lamberti, if he existed, with a courteous inquiry about the violin. Once in Beritola, however, the delicacy of the errand to one of Kirke's temperament became appalling. His own pride, his quick consideration for others, his proneness to nice distinctions reared the barrier. The thought of forcing an acquaintance with the proud old Italian, whose careful seclusion was a matter of choice, became extremely distasteful. In the tranquil loveliness of the valley practical considerations fled before the subtler distinctions of chivalry. To inquire if the old musician had willingly parted with his violin or if, in the light of Lauretta's passionate tears and Niccolo's assertion, the absent Pietro had stolen it — either explanation fraught with pain to its former owner — seemed crude and harsh, a primitive mental surgery that might reveal an embarrassing pecuniary need. He had hoped for another unguarded admission from Lauretta, but since her first mention of Pietro the little Italian girl had maintained an aggravating silence and Kirke dared not question her too fully without disclosing the story of his purchase. He had no intention of challenging a false owner to declare himself by a careless hint of his errand, and he was stub-

bornly resolved to learn the history of the precious instrument in full before relinquishing his own claim to it.

To the American, the long, drowsy days were delightful. From his morning plunge in the lake to the starlit nights, he was lazily content, a growing wonder in his heart at the valley's daily revelations of beauty. Gribbins looked on askance. His master's whims were beyond comprehension. Mr. Bentley's deliberate disregard of the conventionalities of dress manifested itself in an unaccountable aversion to dressing for dinner and a curious predilection for a suit of flannels, picturesque and becoming enough, the valet grudgingly admitted, but certainly not suitable for constant wear. Mr. Bentley's appetite had grown beyond the limits of decency; and Mr. Bentley indulged in long, solitary mountain tramps, during which the Englishman fortified himself from assault by carefully barricading his bedroom door with a trunk and was only restrained from searching for the delinquent by a standing threat of instant death. Moreover, the American's friendly overtures to the peasants became daily more cordial.

When he lounged up the valley in the early evening, bareheaded and coatless, the sleeves of his silken outing shirt rolled back to the elbows and his hands dug deep in his trousers' pockets, he democratically joined in their discussions with

a native-born fluency that to Gribbins seemed positively unchristian in an English speaking gentleman; and so presently Mr. Bentley's inexplicable habit of dreaming in the shadow of the ilex trees bordering the lake during the long hot afternoons and irresponsibly falling to sleep in an utterly defenceless attitude, thereby inviting destruction at the hands of the murderous inhabitants of the valley, resulted in a quavering protest.

"Gribbins," Kirke replied sternly, "you are the only evidence of modern civilisation in this valley and I propose to forget your existence. For the time being you're an automaton who brushes my clothes by steam. If I choose to fall asleep along the lake, I'd prefer to do so without the consciousness that your melancholy eye is glued upon me from the nearest bush as it was this afternoon. You sign your death-warrant if you follow me again. I'll set Tony on you!"

The finality of this decision was irrevocable. Gribbins steeled himself to resignation and bitterly conned over the details of his sojourn in a village of "blood-thirsty macaroni-eaters" to relate to his oft-quoted confidant, the mysterious John 'Apworth. He presently became inured to Tony's exuberance, however, and could take the magazines and papers from him without a shiver, though he always kept a protecting hand upon the ponderous watch-chain of shillings, an act

of suspicious foreboding which the Italian with his ready wit rightly interpreted and promptly proceeded to justify by threatening swoops in the direction of the valued ornament.

To Kirke there was but one jarring note in the summer idyl, a letter from Mürren full of reproaches from his mother, hurt and aggrieved by his change of plans. The story of the violin in barest outline had been followed by a description of the villa and its figurative hedge of fire, of the old castle on the ridge, of the rare charm of the valley nestling in its shadow — Kirke had felt rather proud of the description — but the answer proved that the budget of explanation had failed in its duty of peacemaking, as he knew it would, and with a little shrug of sincere regret at his mother's attitude, Kirke again took up the fascinating thread of his new life — the unpleasant impression of the letter obliterated much in the fashion of a counter-irritant by the unexpected honour of meeting Count Teodoro di Gomito face to face for the first time the day it came.

Kirke, eager for the cool shadows that fringed the lake, had turned into the road skirting the villa when a man appeared upon the portico and walked briskly toward the hedge of fire. For an instant his heart leaped in a hope that was summarily rejected as the man advanced. Marietta's graphic description was unmistak-

able. Count Teodoro was walking rapidly toward him, frowning in evident annoyance. He passed the American with a quick look of suspicion and continued up the road. Kirke looked the Italian squarely in the face, thrilling with instinctive aversion, predisposed, perhaps, by Marietta's frank discussion of his unpopularity.

He saw a man of perhaps forty, tall and squarely built in spite of a certain heavy embonpoint; a face decidedly handsome in its perfect regularity of feature, its fine eyes and bronze skin, heavily marked by the blackness of hair and brow and moustache. There was a masterful assertion of importance in the Italian's manner, and Kirke watched him disappear, a little surprised by his own impetuous dislike.

A dry, intense heat lay over the valley, infusing a drowsy languor in the very air. It crept into the American's veins and speedily lulled him into sensuous indolence as he lazily sought the shadows of the lake shore. Opposite the waters laved the base of a giant rock with a sleepy murmur. Where the sun flashed along the surface of the lake it threw off a blinding radiance in vivid contrast to the dark pools of sapphire eddying in shadow. The lake reflections were brilliant images repeating in a marvellous perfection of detail the intensity of the day. Off to the north, where the lake curved musically around a jutting point, a towering

hill seemed grimly to barricade its rippling line of silver, a dark file of peaks and ridges stretching far in the distance behind it.

From half-closed lids, Kirke watched a canoe float idly around the northern bend. It was apparently empty, but as the stream bore it closer he was a little startled to see a hand trailing in the water, seemingly inert and offering no resistance to the current. In quick alarm the American recalled a canoe rocking at anchor near by. It had tempted him daily as it strained at its rope with no protection but the coat of arms blazing upon its bow, an intimidating influence heretofore sufficient in itself, but to-day, with scant respect for the nobleman whose glory it flaunted, Kirke slashed the painter and paddled out into the lake, intent upon inspecting the drifting boat and its motionless occupant. A bit of white fluttered over the stern in the faint breeze that swept the lake as the American deftly turned his canoe and floated toward it.

A girl lay asleep in the frail cockle-shell, gracefully indifferent to the uncertain whims of the elements, one slender white arm buried in the crimson silk of the pillow behind her head, the other still trailing in the water. The American's eyes flashed with admiration, the keen appreciation of the artist for grace and colour and the fitness of things. There was a

suggestion of the Orient in the girl's indolent pose, in the rich tints of the cushions, in the deep saffron of the lining wood of the canoe, repeated in a mellower tone in the wood of the guitar lying carelessly in the stern.

The wind had ruffled the sleeper's hair into a sombre mist, framing a face oval and clear cut; it had lashed her cheeks into a delicate colour which the American instantly likened to the soft hue of a crumpled rose leaf. Yes, she too was Oriental in colouring from the black masses of her hair, so dark indeed that its shadows seemed heavily purple, to the olive skin — delicately etched by the jet of brows and lashes.

Again the wind sprang up and rippled the surface of the lake. This time it snatched a slip of paper from the girl's canoe and sent it fluttering toward the American. The paper bore but four lines of writing, hurriedly copied, it seemed, from a favourite poem. Kirke read them, approving the mood that had led the girl to copy them. The unknown poet had pictured a lake of blazing heat fringed in shadow, magically imprisoning an atmosphere of fierce heat and indolent languor; he had crystallised in poetic form the tremulous spirit of the South that brooded to-day over the lake, seeking to entangle men in its sinuous meshes to make them prisoners of the sun, to lull them treacherously

into calm while nursing the slumberous passions of mind and body.

Both canoes were floating idly with the current. With a smile Kirke drew a pencil from his pocket and scribbled rapidly across the paper in Italian,

To "The Lady of the Lake!"

Are you the lovely Nereid who weaves the reflected tapestry in the water that you dare to dream upon its fickle bosom and tempt the Lake to claim its own? A solicitous Goblin, hidden along the shore, will watch your fairy barque until you wake to control it!

With a gleam of amusement in his eyes, the American noiselessly slipped the paper beneath the strings of the guitar to protect it from the fitful breeze and paddled briskly back to shore, fearful lest the sleeper should waken before he had found a safe retreat. In the shadow of a thick clump of ilex he flung himself down to watch the progress of the drifting canoe. A strange bird sent a harsh call ringing across the lake and the girl abruptly sat up. Kirke saw her lean toward the guitar. An instant later she swept the lake shore with startled eyes, rapidly turned and paddled to the north, darting out of sight around the bend whence she had floated.

CHAPTER VI

NOCTURNIA

HABIT is a merciless tyrant to whom we all unconsciously surrender. It drove Kirke to the same ilex trees the following afternoon; it ruthlessly directed his eyes to the northern bend of the lake; it even pointed a tantalising finger at the Count's canoe and projected a mirage before him in which the American saw himself seated in its aristocratic interior, paddling around the bend of the lake to explore its northern shores, a suggestion which he abruptly frowned away. Inconsistently, however, although the weather and the water had succumbed to the Tyrant and were repeating the same tone of light and heat, it failed to produce the dreaming "Lady of the Lake," an absurd violation of precedent decidedly annoying. In her stead it inaugurated an irresistible drowsiness, born of the crooning of the lake, of the woodland orchestra of piping birds with its long, rolling drum-beat by the cicadas, of the hot afternoon's wearisome vigil, a drowsiness that near sunset terminated the American's scientific effort — very ambitious in view of the distance — to analyse the geological strata of the hill at

the northern bend, and lulled him into a restless slumber. He awoke with a start, conscious of a glimmering patch of white directly opposite. By degrees it resolved itself into a sheet of paper conspicuously pinned to an ilex bough and, reflecting that it had not been there before his brief siesta, Kirke lazily rose to examine it. There was a pencilled inscription scribbled across the surface.

"To the Presumptuous Goblin (unduly solicitous) Hidden Along the Shore!" he read, a quick flash of amusement in his eyes at the mocking quotation, "are you Father Neptune himself that you presume to chide a dreaming Nereid? The lake and I are old friends, *Signore Americano!*"

Kirke re-read the mocking message in startled interest. The consciousness that the "Lady of the Lake" had mischievously pinned it to the ilex bough while he slept thrilled him unaccountably. Her apparent knowledge of his identity, however, puzzled him. He had been securely hidden when she awoke and his scribbled warning had been couched in careful Italian. If, as he shrewdly suspected, she had to-day discovered his retreat by chance, how had she guessed that the sleeper was the presumptuous author of the scrawl tucked beneath the guitar strings?

A little piqued by the reflection that he had

no clue whatever to the identity of the mocking Nereid, he sought the water's edge and faced the breeze that was now blowing full and strong across the lake. It was long past sunset. Above the ghostly line of cypress on the farther shore, the sky had grown delicately violet, splashed with fading rose and amber. Dusk was veiling the distant ridges; through the crepuscular dimness their outlines loomed grey and indefinite, one by one resolving into fantastic mountains of smoky mist. Sublimely indifferent to the culinary ménage of the Ciapellettos, Kirke stretched himself out upon the lake shore with a sigh of infinite content, revelling in the soft, glimmering tones of the southern twilight.

The lake slowly purpled, a haze trembling above it, half grey, half violet. It crept from shore to shore, blotting out the lines of cypress and ilex and deepening at the northern bend into shadows of ebony.

The outline of the chapel opposite grew indistinct, still retaining, however, the picturesque semblance of a dream church. And suddenly from its shadowy walls, the tremulous tones of an organ swept softly across the lake. To the American the music seemed a fitting expression of his own response to the beauty of the twilight. It grew, in crescendo, to chords full and rich and deep as the unseen player opened the great diapason of the organ and flooded the lake

with a rolling majesty of sound, the blare of the organ trumpets triumphantly heralding the approach of Night. The rumbling music of the Pedal Bourdon echoed among the hills with the muttering sound of distant thunder. It died away, giving place to the plaintive harmony of the reeds, then clear and sweet above its accompaniment rose the wail of the organ oboe in solo, an inanimate singer voicing the perfect melody of Schumann's *Träumerei.*

The familiar strains awakened the memory — how distant it seemed! — of Pietro, of the violin, for the melody that had floated out from beneath his own bow that day in convincing test of the violin's value had been the very one that now softly sang its way to his heart. Impulsively he sought the Count's canoe and paddled across the lake to the chapel. The entrance lay away from the shore at the end of a forest path and, finding the door ajar, the American noiselessly entered. A single candle burned upon the altar, and in the dim circle of light, too faintly luminous to shine through the rear windows overlooking the water, sat a girl reverently fingering the organ keys, her eyes upon the great pipes above her head. Kirke could not see her face. The dark head and white gown of the player, however, were familiar. He recognised in them "The Lady of the Lake" and moved silently to the shadows at the left to watch her

profile. The expression of her face was rapt and earnest and thoughtfully tender. Certainly a girl of many moods! The pretty indolence of the dreamer in the canoe, the capricious humour of the Nereid who had pinned the mocking message to the ilex bough, and now this reverent girl seeking a musical expression of her emotional force, Kirke marvelled at the curious temperamental revelation of each.

The music changed to a crooning whisper — it seemed indeed but the echo of a distant 'cello — and stopped. Kirke emerged from the shadows and approached the organ. The girl turned in quick alarm at the sound of his footsteps, colouring a little as her eyes met those of the American.

"You seem fond of solitude, 'Lady of the Lake!'" observed Kirke quietly.

"I am!" she flashed back pointedly, quickly recovering herself, "and its invaders I ruthlessly condemn to the mercy of the waters with whose command you have so artistically endowed me!" A hint of displeasure crept into her voice. "You startled me," she added slowly.

"You startled me, Signorina!" accused Kirke gravely. "The chapel was dissolving into mist and I thought the sounds that crept from it were indeed *Träumerei.* I even fancied that they formed the mystic melody of the Twilight Incarnate stealing across the lake to express to me

the harmony of her blended shadows in chords of fairy music."

"Very pretty, Sir Goblin!" mocked the girl, swiftly veiling the gleam of appreciation that had flashed up in her dark eyes. "Are you such an ethereal being," she went on satirically, glancing curiously at him, "that you enjoy immunity from mundane pangs of hunger? Or do you indulge in long, solitary vigils along the lake in the hope of dethroning King Neptune? A continued abstinence might possibly reduce you to the necessary royal vapour! I thought of course," she finished disapprovingly, "that you had gone home like a civilised being with a conventional appetite!"

"I had a disturbing experience," apologised the American, "which explains my domestic lapse. A very sarcastic Nereid communicated with me this afternoon in writing."

"Impossible!" mocked the girl in wide-eyed astonishment.

"It does sound so, doesn't it?" Kirke looked straight into her eyes. "It has made me feel very ethereal, as if I had absorbed her supernatural qualities. Naturally in the light of such a transformation, I couldn't with decency descend to eating!"

"Nevertheless," averred the girl, smiling, "the Nereid dined very substantially an hour ago and returned to the chapel under the delusion

that the shore was quite free from goblins!"

"It would seem," commented Kirke absently, apparently addressing an organ stop, "that a Nereid whose peculiar gifts enabled her to ferret out the nationality, identity, and hiding place of a Solicitous Goblin with absolutely no clue, would experience no great difficulty in ascertaining the presence of a misguided mortal mooning on the lake shore!"

"If the Goblin became a misguided mortal in her absence," came the quick retort, "the Nereid might possibly have undergone a similar transformation. That would account for her delusion."

"You paddled very softly or I should have heard you!"

The girl flushed. "I always paddle softly and slowly at twilight," she offered defensively; then catching the sympathetic comprehension in the American's face, she continued naïvely, "it seems a sacrilege to disturb the shadows. I just creep over them!"

She rose as if to go.

"Tell me," pleaded Kirke inconsequently, "how you knew!"

A gleam of mischief sparkled again in the dark eyes. The girl who in her brief melting mood had confessed her unwillingness to disturb the lake shadows had been replaced again by the mocking Nereid.

"Italian gentlemen," she said enigmatically, addressing the organ stop which the American had selected as his confidant, "who are sufficiently cultured and imaginative to talk of Nereids in written warnings do *not* confuse the tenses of their *verbs!*"

"Did I?"

"You did!"

"And automatically declared myself a foreigner," deplored Kirke. "That was because I hurried so."

"Besides," added the girl lightly, "Italian Nereids are omniscient. I should have known anyway."

"Which accounts, perhaps, for your ready recognition and invasion of my hiding place?"

"Had it occurred to Signore Bentley"— Kirke started at the name. She was indeed omniscient! —"that he is the only *forestiere* in Beritola? You deliberately appropriated my ilex summer house along the lake where I read in the long hot afternoons," she accused suddenly. "Perhaps you can imagine my horror when I sought it to find a prosaic American lazily sleeping in it!"

"It was a sacrilege," agreed Kirke, "but I was tired of waiting."

The girl ignored the implication.

"Besides, I have another exhaustive source of information." She moved swiftly toward the

door. "The Lady of the Lake must return to her watery throne," she said whimsically. "It behooves not a daughter of the mist to gossip with mortals."

"You are no longer the Lady of the Lake!" declared the American. "The conception is far too commonplace. I shall call you Nocturnia, the wilful Queen of the Southern Night. It carries with it a suggestion of the night and the shadows and the mystic music floating over the lake, breathing the dreaming melody of the *Träumerei.*"

"You are very fanciful," the girl said quietly, closing the chapel door. "I've forgotten the candle!" she added contritely.

Kirke retraced his steps and blew out the flickering light. When he again sought the chapel entrance she was gone. Impatiently he hurried to the lake shore. It was quite dark but the slender sickle of the moon hung above the lake, casting a pale radiance upon the water. A dancing pathway of greenish-silver lay across from shore to shore and but a few feet away a canoe rocked in the gleaming trail.

"You should be afraid to go home!" called Kirke softly and a little suggestively, manfully suppressing a desire to follow her.

"You forget," came the answer lightly over the water, "that I am Nocturnia, Queen of the Southern Night. A royal guard of fireflies

awaits to escort me on the farther shore!" She pointed to the other side where the soft glow of fireflies pulsed intermittently in the velvet darkness.

"But you go to the north!" objected Kirke.

"Only by day. By night I moor on the other side!" She turned and looked back over her shoulder, her dark, mocking face illumined by the ghostly light of the rising moon. "*Buona notte, Signore Americano!*" she called.

There was a dip and a splash and a shower of sparkling jewel-drops from the paddle whose blade gleamed like silver as it left the water; then the canoe darted swiftly across the lake in the rippling pathway of the moon to the waiting fireflies who seemed indeed to swing their lanterns from time to time to guide the Queen. The moonlight danced along the water, bathing her slender form in radiance, and Kirke fancied it floated about her head like a luminous veil of silver mist.

She was indeed Nocturnia! he thought, his eyes alight; Nocturnia, a creature of whims and fancies, of nocturnal shadows and melodies and dreams, a capricious goddess of the southern night, the midnight shadows of her hair imprisoned by a floating veil of moonfire, her escort a battalion of fireflies drawn up in glittering array on the farther shore, her fairy barque, in which she paddled across the lake of rippling moon-

light, propelled by a blade of purest silver! And high above in the sky hung the Night Queen's coat-of-arms, an argent crescent in a field of stars!

CHAPTER VII

MR. PHILIP AINSWORTH

"ONE would think," ruminated Kirke, glaring at an accumulated pile of mail, "that a fellow could purchase immunity from fiendish business letters once in a while. I wish I could send out a thought wave that would gently intimate to Rogers what I think of him. It would probably combine all the artistic qualities of an earthquake, a flood and a fire in its effect upon the territory through which it passed. 'Copper going up!' What the deuce do I care if it goes up and copper-plates the sky!"

Kirke savagely tore his way through a pile of correspondence conscientiously forwarded from Mürren by his mother, and answered the more important ones with a curt line, intimating that his lawyers had instructions to cope with all necessary business problems that should come up during the summer, a proceeding which to his growing discomfort involved the whole afternoon.

The breeze that crept through the window was drowsily warm and fragrant. Outside, the cicadas were shrilling insistent reminders of the

heat that mantled the valley in a fiery haze, but Kirke, staring absently from the window with his pen trailing off into an elongated scrawl, was unconscious of the blinding glare of the sun. He saw only the lake, rippling musically around the northern bend, the moss and the cypress along the shore, the chapel! A mule trudging along beneath a stack of straw obtruded itself within the line of his vision and the mirage vanished. The bell about the donkey's neck tinkled audibly in the quiet. The swarthy peasant, walking beside it, an enormous grape-vine leaf grotesquely tucked behind each ear in fancied protection from the heat, flashed his teeth in a friendly grin and waved a brown arm in salutation. Kirke returned it and with a sigh turned back to the letter that lay before him, a final effort to appease his mother.

His pen had barely touched the paper again, however, when the calm of the sleepy afternoon was shattered by a sound so thoroughly out of keeping with the atmosphere of Beritola that Kirke leaned out of the window in startled astonishment. A big Panhard was pounding its way down the steep mountain road, the whirr of the exhaust alarmingly distinct. The monster belched forth an incredible number of hoarse honks in declaration of arrival and Kirke grinned at the instant commotion in the valley. In evident alarm the peasants

poured from their houses, crossing themselves devoutly.

The car came rapidly on at a speed that would have thrown a traffic squad into hysterics. A head encased in leather cap and goggles projected itself through a cloud of dust and inquired in execrable Italian if he had "struck" Beritola — of which in its literal sense there was no doubt in Kirke's mind — and upon receiving a panic-stricken reply in the affirmative, drove like mad through the gaping villagers and stopped suddenly with a sharp report from the vicinity of the tires. The valley instantly cleared, most of the peasants seeking the safety of their cottages and cautiously peering from doors and windows. Fate had halted the Panhard within a short distance of the Ciapelletto cottage and an instant later Kirke heard a voice whose familiar accents were unmistakable.

"For heaven's sake, Riley," it drawled, "don't tell me you've blown out another shoe!"

The chauffeur's freckled face cracked in a broad grin, revealing a mouth of incredible dimensions.

"Shure, sor," he said, "be the delicate little sound that jist soothed me ear, it do be afther lookin' that way! The divil's in 'em. These dago roads is hell on tires, sor. Oi've a notion we've struck a glass mine this time. Did we blow all the guineas away?"

With a grin of delight Kirke bounded down the stairs. A young giant, whose leather leggins and motoring rig were thickly creased with dust, lazily emerged from the machine and was about to seat himself upon the ground in the capacity of advisory spectator to the proposed change of tires when his eyes suddenly lit upon Kirke, who was silently regarding him in considerable amusement.

"Kirke Bentley," he roared, shaking himself until the dust flew, "I'm after you! I'm commissioned by the Government and your maternal ancestor to drag you by main force to an asylum for incurables."

Kirke grinned and held out his hand.

"Shake hands," he suggested, "and we'll talk it over."

Philip Ainsworth seized the proffered hand and wrung it heartily, jerked off his goggles, and having removed his leather cap, gave it a terrific bang against the side of the car to remove the dust. Shorn of his cranial appendages he revealed a tousled mop of wind-blown brown hair and a grimy face. It was evident that a scientific application of soap and water might result in a decidedly good-looking, clean-cut young man, but at present the only feature visible through his mask of dirt was a pair of dark blue eyes that flashed a warning of perennial mischief and daring. They twinkled good-

humouredly at Kirke's reply and the lower part of his face expanded into a broad grin.

"Why don't you tell me you're glad to see me?" he suggested lazily.

"Don't tempt me to be a hypocrite!" retorted Kirke, smiling.

"Truthful to the last!" murmured his friend admiringly. "Even after he had become a doddering imbecile, first made known to his friends by a sudden trip to a village he'd never heard of before, he retained that scrupulous accuracy of statement for which we all loved him. Riley, you might be fixing that tire."

The Irishman obligingly descended and became the nucleus of a growing crowd. Kirke ushered his irrepressible friend up to his room with a grin.

"I gather," he observed, "that I am to have your blessed companionship for the night!"

"Sons of Garibaldi! what hospitality!" exploded Phil. "Yes, *figlio mio,* to-night and many other nights!"

"Not on your life!" came the prompt reply. "Twenty-four hours of you is nerve-racking for a peaceable man like myself. To-morrow night at sundown you disappear over the crest of yon hill, Panhard, Riley and all!"

Kirke smilingly curtailed his friend's elaborate exposition of his plans for the summer by summoning Gribbins. In response to his order

the Englishman haughtily descended the stairs to look after Mr. Ainsworth's luggage, a proceeding which resulted in a muffled altercation between him and Riley. The valet's distrust of the abandoned chauffeur was instinctive. Riley's crimson locks, his freckled face and the daredevil gleam in his eyes had awakened it; his admiring imitation of the Englishman's upturned nose as the latter paused at the Panhard, his lurid profanity as he mended the shoe, and his polite query if there was any truth in the prevalent opinion that the English were a race of blockheads established it beyond recall.

The domestic adjustment that followed was rife with excitement, and Kirke regarded the invasion of his rooms with considerable amusement. It involved a wild scurrying upon the part of Lauretta, Marietta and Riley, reinforced by the more dignified assistance of the Englishman, who watched the chauffeur's energetic appropriation of his own room in silent horror. Between puffs of cigar smoke, Mr. Ainsworth lazily marshalled his cosmopolitan forces with a running fire of ridiculous comment. His eye presently fell upon the little supper table by the window, about which Marietta was circling in wild excitement, and without further ceremony he seated himself, complimenting Marietta extravagantly in his unique Italian upon the tempting array of food.

"*Madonna mia!*" shrieked the little brown woman, pounding her hands together in fierce delight, "a mad fellow, that young man!" It was quite evident that his vagaries had already proclaimed him a kindred spirit.

At the conclusion of the little supper, Mr. Ainsworth arose, carefully arrayed a line of excellent cigars along the edge of Kirke's bed like a picket fence with the suggestion that they begin at each end and smoke toward the middle, and proceeded to enlighten Kirke concerning his plans for the summer which were, to say the least, startling.

"I'm lazy," he commented, appropriating the first picket, "and I have an extraordinary feeling of weariness!"

Kirke grinned but wisely refrained from comment upon this lifelong tendency of Mr. Ainsworth's.

"I hadn't much interest in Alpine climbing—"

"Nor I!" interpolated Kirke.

"And so when your letter arrived at Mürren with the sad news of your sudden seizure, I—er—" Phil cleared his throat and averted his eyes, "I grew restless. Your mother was fretting about your eccentricity—she really had doubts of your sanity, old man—and so with that innate generosity for which I am justly famous, I offered to risk my life and look you

up. In fact," Phil beamed with the utmost friendliness and waved his cigar about, "I'm going to spend the summer with you."

"Indeed you're not!"

"You surprise me! Your remark, however, is merely another indication of your insanity and as such does not affect my decision. I like the looks of this valley immensely. I'm just in the mood for rusticating, since it entails no physical or mental effort of any sort, and you know, Kirke, that I'm never happy where you are not!"

"You'll have to learn to be happy without me," grinned Kirke, amiably, stretching his legs out comfortably and imitating the comprehensive cigar swoop with which Phil had announced his decision, "I've changed my original intention. Instead of leaving to-morrow night — you'll go early in the morning."

Phil looked out of the window and regarded the castle intently.

"You'll get over it, old man," he said kindly. "Doc Carrington says — he's up at Mürren now with the aspiring icicles — that you have — er —" he drew an old letter from his pocket and affected to study it with an air of exaggerated gravity. "Oh, yes, some encephalic disorder superinduced by physical inertia. I presume the laity would call it lunacy resulting from acute laziness. He says you'll recover if you have proper care, such as I alone can give you."

Mr. Ainsworth flicked the ashes from his cigar, ruffled his brown hair with a characteristic motion, and remarked, "now, sir, you're going to tell me the true story of this violin business. The brief account you sent to Mürren sounded like a rave from a foolish house. When your mother told me about the violin with folding doors — by the way, Kirke, you're quite sure it hasn't velvet portieres as well? — I said immediately, much to the dear lady's disgust, 'H'm, well, Kirke has fallen into bad habits. Must be hitting it up! Does he explain how the ground floor of this violin is laid out and what sort of a curious monster inhabits it?' Your sister caustically inquired the meaning of the classic phrase 'hitting it up,' and I explained that it meant eating 'loco weed,' a Western plant that seriously interferes with one's organs of thought."

Kirke arose and peered into the hallway to assure himself that no interested eavesdropper lurked in the dim recesses, cautiously closed the doors cutting off the hall and the back room in which there appeared to be a temperamental clash between the valet and chauffeur based upon the relative merits of England and Ireland, and unlocked his trunk. Phil read the inscription upon the panel of the violin in genuine astonishment.

"A Stradivarius, Kirke!" he exclaimed,

whistling, "you didn't mention that in your letter!"

"No," confessed Kirke, "it sounded too improbable. I didn't tell half the facts"; and as Phil examined the instrument, Kirke related the story in full; the careless purchase from the Italian in America, the peculiar outcome of his nap at the hotel in Genoa, Lauretta's passionate outburst proving her identity as the ragged exile's sweetheart, Niccolo's enigmatic assertion, and last of all, the astounding fact that Dioneo Lamberti, whose name appeared upon the other panel, was a musician living in Beritola.

"And your theory?" Phil leaned forward in his interest. His habitual frivolity had slipped from him like a discarded cloak.

"That there's more to it than ordinary theft! I'm convinced, of course, that Pietro Masetto stole it from Dioneo Lamberti, but —" he paused uncertainly.

"Of course," agreed Phil, "the bare fact that Pietro Masetto hails from the same place as Signore Lamberti is suspicious, giving all the circumstances their due weight, the inscriptions on the violin and Pietro's probable financial inability to purchase the instrument from its rightful owner; but, had it occurred to you, Kirke, that Pietro would not be likely to sell a genuine Stradivarius for two hundred dollars if he knew its value? It's the Dolphin type, I notice, and

as such is worth between five and ten thousand. On the other hand, if he didn't suspect its unusual nature, he wouldn't be likely to steal an apparently commonplace instrument and demand the price you paid for it."

"That's exactly what has convinced me that it's no commonplace theft," said Kirke decidedly. "You remember he assured me it was no 'ordinaire' violin. Besides, the boy's eyes were honest and decent."

"And so," observed Phil presently, a flash of humour in his eyes, "you came to Beritola not knowing whether Signore Lamberti was alive or not! You're a whimsician, old man."

"What, may I inquire," began Kirke with elaborate courtesy, "is a whimsician?"

"A whimsician," was the sage retort, "is — er — frankly speaking, a whimsician! Don't demand details. Your story is mighty interesting, Kirke. As I think it over, however, I'm a little inclined to think that Signore Dioneo may have pawned the violin and Pietro picked it up."

They talked far into the night, the fire of their cigars incessantly glowing in the darkness of the little room. Outside, the valley lay in a mist of moonlight, and Phil, looking at the circle of hills beyond capped with the glory of the Southern moon, traced the ghostly outline of their ridges against a sky softly aglow with an ethereal lunar light, and grew strangely quiet, feeling

something of the ardent enthusiasm of the man opposite who was voicing his deep appreciation of the starlit valley, of the long, hot days, of the potent charm of this impulsive life of the South, of the lure of the lake and its cypressed shores; but oddly enough, although Phil's softened mood had made him eloquent, he omitted to speak of the tremulous music that had swept across the lake in the purple dusk, or of the girl who had paddled across in the pathway of the moon with a gleaming blade of silver!

Mr. Ainsworth characteristically began his first day in Beritola by reaching out of bed in the early hours of the morning and propelling one of Kirke's shoes through the window at the bickering twig-gatherers, much to Marietta's delight, for it hit her accursed *pecorajo*. With a beautiful stolidity of conscience the disturbed slumberer fell asleep again as soon as their voices died away, responding later in the morning to his bedfellow's prodding thumb with an enigmatic grunt.

In the rear room a grumbling exchange of satire, of which the words "race of blockheads" was plainly audible in Riley's taunting voice, received a sudden impetus to violence in the dignified reply:

"At least, Riley, we are not a race of carrot 'eads!"

Apprised by the commotion that followed that the Americans had arisen, Marietta, much to Kirke's mystification, appeared in the doorway with *Illustrissimo's* shoe.

"Same which I shied at two human 'dago' sparrows squabbling under my window!" explained Phil imperturbably, and learning the identity of the sparrows from Kirke, instantly proceeded to dilate apologetically in Italian upon a peculiar species of nightmare which periodically seized him in the early morning. Marietta received the news of his somnolent affliction in silence, but her eyes twinkled shrewdly and she exchanged a glance of understanding with Kirke, proffering the remarks with a grin, that the shoe had hit Niccolo in the back and he had gone off even forgetting to sing *"Addio, mio caro amore,"* in his furious conviction that Marietta had delegated Manuel to attack him from the rear at the psychological point of their interview.

Kirke's mail that morning contained a letter from his sister which shed considerable light upon Phil's sudden arrival. He wisely refrained from mentioning it to his irresponsible guest whose explanation of his abrupt departure from Mürren had not been particularly lucid. It ran:

"Frankly, Phil and I have quarrelled. He left Mürren in a terrible rage, telegraphing that dreadful Riley at Geneva, where he left his car, to be in readiness for a

rough trip. He told mother that he was going to Beritola for, as he recalled it, Kirke at least had an agreeable disposition. More, he dashed around banging doors and acting generally as if he were a volcano until Billy Renter good-naturedly inquired, 'What's your hurry, Phil? Anybody dead?' and the amiable Mr. Ainsworth replied in a voice that nearly shrivelled Billy up, 'not *yet*, but there probably will be before I leave!'"

Kirke smiled. The manner of his chum's departure had been quite as characteristic as his whirlwind invasion of Beritola!

Whatever Mr. Ainsworth's mental disturbance had been when he left Mürren, there was no revelation of it in the days that followed. He lazily adapted himself to the drowsy calm of the little valley and, although his comments upon its beauty were eminently characteristic, Kirke was astonished at their undercurrent of genuine appreciation. The lure of the South occasionally revealed the emotional depths that Mr. Ainsworth so assiduously sought to conceal beneath his habitual mask of frivolity.

Kirke had been a little disturbed by his friend's irresponsible invasion. The daily freedom of his surrender to impulse seemed jeopardised by the presence of another. The lazy, dreaming hours, the lake vigils would all of course have to be banished, he told himself discontentedly, but it soon became evident that Mr. Ainsworth intended to pursue the even tenor of his days according to inclination, and expected

his chum to do the same. He had readily divined the charm that held Kirke enthralled, the absence of conventional restraint and the emotional riot of his senses in the old Nature worship. And so the two men came to an instinctive understanding, and to his great surprise Kirke found no break in his lazy days. Phil accepted his whims without question. Where he had expected a restraint at which he would inwardly chafe, Kirke found only an intimate companionship for which he was profoundly grateful.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAMBERTIS

BERITOLA had scarcely recovered from the explosive arrival of the Panhard and a *second* American when it found food for still further excitement. Interest this time centred upon a vacant house, the property of Count Teodoro di Gomito which lay perilously aslant on the slope of a mountain near the Ciapellettos. The gables emerged from a thicket of trees like a Swiss châlet; a wild tangle of rose and jasmine climbed over the porch, and from the rear windows the mountain stretched steeply upward, seamed by winding goat-paths. A twisting trail wound its way up the mountainside to the cottage door, dwindling there into a narrow mule path that skirted the rocks to the summit.

In this cottage one eventful morning, with the versatile Riley as cook and his English colleague as housekeeper, the Americans took up their abode, Mr. Ainsworth aptly christening the bachelor establishment the Villa Spa Gett. The arrival of a Neapolitan furniture van, flanked by an admiring cavalcade of peasants, ushered in a day of events. Marietta's frenzied

superintendence, relentlessly gibed by Niccolo in the character of spectator; the constant crowd of good-natured peasants about the door; interminable disputes between the cook and the housekeeper, squabbling about the proposed division of duties; Tony's arrival and conviction that the domestic affairs of the Americans required his expert direction (an announcement which brought down Marietta's wrath upon his head and won him an instant backing in Niccolo) — the ensuing dispute in which the entire valley took sides until Riley appeared with a broom and cleared them all off the premises — all this went to the making of a day of commotion which found a dramatic climax late that afternoon.

Quiet had settled over the Villa Spa Gett with the final departure of Marietta. Kirke, comfortably smoking his pipe on the porch in the shelter of the crimson rambler, looked down over the valley stretched at his feet with a sigh of content. The tiled roofs below deflected the afternoon sun in dazzling sheets of light. From his elevation the American caught the glimmer of the lake darkly outlined in cypress, of the chapel cross flashing gold, of the old villa hedged in crimson. From the ensemble of the landscape a figure detached itself, striding rapidly toward him. It climbed the mountain road to the Villa Spa Gett, and presently resolved itself into the

semblance of Philip Ainsworth, flushed and excited.

"I'm the only individual with brains and tact in this valley!" he announced as he seated himself.

"And modesty," prompted Kirke. "You omitted that!"

"I've just been talking to the estimable Lamberti!" exploded the valley's sole representative of brains and tact, mopping his forehead, "Signore Dioneo Lamberti himself!"

Kirke stared incredulously.

"If you'll just stop talking," grinned Phil, "and gently intimate to those dark and melancholy orbs of yours that their stare is becoming embarrassing, I won't mind telling you how I did it. I casually wandered by the villa, an inquisitive habit caught from you, and quite as casually looked in. A tall man with a mass of snow white hair and a pair of the blackest eyes and eyebrows I have ever seen was clipping roses at the side by that queer looking old well. I immediately decided that it must be the mysterious Lamberti himself. So without any false delicacy I promptly stepped over the hedge of fire as you so poetically call it — without burning my trousers by the way — and inquired if I could have a drink. I explained that the well with its quaint lattice and moss and all the rest of the picturesque fixings looked very inviting

to a thirsty man. Now, see here, Kirke, I *was* thirsty. That smile of yours is an insult to my veracity. He assented very courteously — he's one of those graceful, old-fashioned chaps — and while I was drinking I explained my life's history in my best Italian. You needn't grin! It may be unique in spots, but it gets there just the same. Well, I consumed a couple of gallons of water cudgelling my brain for some Italian who might serve as a mutual acquaintance, and Signore Lamberti began to look apprehensive for the various buttons of my attire, when, quite suddenly, Abbato flashed into my mind. I wonder now that I hadn't thought of him before. Remember? He was the Italian ambassador in Washington when the governor was in the Senate. They were great friends. I stated the fact casually and the Lamberti promptly fell upon my neck and wept. That may be slightly exaggerated. At any rate, he straightened up, extended his hand with a courtly air that made me look around to see if my prime minister and retinue of slaves were anywhere in sight, and informed me in the most cordial fashion that any friend of Signore Abbato's was most certainly a friend of his. They're cousins, besides being the dearest of friends! We're invited to break bread with the gentleman to-night, and after the exertions of the day I feel that I can break a great deal. Seriously, Kirke," Phil grew sud-

denly thoughtful, "he's the most magnetic old chap I ever met and his personality somehow fairly fascinated me. He elevated me so much in my own estimation that I had some thoughts of going to-night attired in a Roman toga with Riley in similar costume following me as my trusted freedman, but unfortunately Riley's general physique isn't in keeping with the garb of Rome!"

A glorious panoply of colour lay ahead of them as they descended the mountain road at sunset. The sky behind the castle was vividly banded in topaz. Long, glittering spears of light lay athwart the valley as the Sun King couched his golden lances against a terrible armour of fire. In the fiery halo of the sunset the rolling vapour above Vesuvius was but faintly discernible.

To Kirke, as he viewed the landscape arched by a vault of tropical splendour and barricaded upon all sides by serrated ridges afire with the last light of the day, the very atmosphere of the valley was laden with mediæval romance. The prospect of talking with the man whose ancestor's name lay written above his own upon the panel of the Stradivarius had awakened a fire of excitement within him that he sought in vain to control. In mental panorama a stately cavalcade filed through his mind, peopling the val-

ley with a throng of the Middle Ages and at the head rode an old Italian with burning eyes and the frost of life's winter upon his head, bearing aloft in harmonious accoutrement an old violin — himself as fitting a denizen of the chivalrous age gone by as the shadowy ranks he marshalled.

The blazing line of the geranium hedge recalled the present, and in silence the two Americans walked up the gravel to the old villa. Phil clanged the quaint brass knocker, and as it left his hand, Kirke noticed that it was a bronze reproduction of Michelangelo's grinning mask of a Satyr. It somehow hinted of the Italian's patriotism and loyalty.

The door swung back, and Dioneo Lamberti himself appeared upon the threshold. Kirke thrilled in response to the magnetic appeal of the man before him. He was tall — taller than Phil — his physique attesting a wiry strength and powerful nerve force. A pair of great black eyes, which, deeply set beneath heavy brows and lashes of jet, burned with the mysterious fires of the dreamer, and a waving abundance of snow-white hair, bearing in it at times a glint of silver, offered a contrast which Kirke at first found a little startling. There was pride and dignity in the fine old face, but the mouth looked a little tired and sad. In his erect carriage, both graceful and impressive in spite of a certain sug-

gestion of rigidity, the American recognised the inflexible demeanour of the mature man who takes a covert pride in the mastery of his sinews.

"*Favorisca!*" he said with quiet courtesy, holding the door open for his guests, and there was a genuine hospitality in his manner and a rare old-fashioned courtliness that Kirke found irresistible.

"Ah, Signore Ainsworth," he added, extending his hand with a smile as the two Americans paused beside him, "and you, Signore Bentley, I am indeed glad to meet you! It is a curious world. I little suspected that I should one day have the pleasure of entertaining those who honoured my cousin with generous hospitality in a distant land." He turned again to Kirke. "Signore Ainsworth has of course mentioned our mutual acquaintance, Benedetto Abbato, my cousin and friend?" His dark eyes gleamed humorously. "An enthusiastic fellow! He is in a perpetual state of effervescence. From his bubbling descriptions, I imagine he regards Signore Philip Ainsworth, Sr., as his patron saint."

"I'm sorry not to have met him!" said Kirke, genuine regret in his voice.

"Signore Ainsworth tells me," the Italian regarded his informant with a smile, "that during my cousin's ambassadorship you were endeavouring to 'change the map of Africa!'" He quoted

Phil with a flash of humour, adding, "I trust you have no such linear designs upon our little valley!"

"None!" laughed Kirke. "I had no idea," he offered gravely, "that the world contained such a wonderfully lovely spot."

"Few visitors come to Beritola," observed the Italian, "but I myself think it is well worth a visit. It is of course rather inaccessible, but as a little Italian proverb of ours runs, 'No hill, no valley!' It is, I think, true of all things in life," he concluded thoughtfully.

He turned and led the way through a wide-old-fashioned hall to a rear room overlooking the garden. The windows were open and through the casements the scent of roses stole in from the nodding bushes, still warmly aglow in the brightness of the sunset. Below a mantel of black walnut, whose sombreness was relieved by the antique candlesticks of brass on either end, yawned a great fireplace, and once more Kirke thrilled at the artistic loyalty of the old Italian, for the andirons that flanked it were bronze images of the Winged Mercury of John of Bologna facing each other in restless flight.

Above the mantel hung a picture of Michelangelo's David, the youthful body in nude strength and grace facing on the opposite wall the full maturity of Lorenzo di Medici brooding in the shadow of his helmet over the Titanic

figures of Night and Morning with which Michelangelo had adorned his tomb. In silence Kirke turned to the latter. It held for him in the grave beauty of the warrior's shadowed face the charm of sanctity. Its powerful appeal to-day, as always, moved him strangely. The old Italian was at his side in an instant. He looked keenly at the American's face and nodded quietly.

"You are right!" he said abruptly. "It's like no other in all the world!" There was the ineffable reverence in his voice of a venerator at the shrine of something holy. Kirke felt that in that instant the dreamer had bared his very soul and that in spirit they two had bowed in tribute to the mighty genius of the Renaissance.

In the old rose garden outside the window, a laughing voice broke the silence. Kirke wheeled in startled interest. In the wilderness of colour beyond the casement stood a girl laden with roses. Niccolo, busily clipping more in spite of her protests, had heaped them in her arms until they brushed her cheek and showered down in a tangled cascade against the white of her gown. Purple shadows lurked in her hair and the delicate colour of her cheek rivalled the rose that brushed against it!

From the American's startled eyes the rose garden vanished and he saw again a canoe rocking in a trail of moonlight. So vividly came the

recollection that he saw for an instant the pulsating glow of the fireflies in the gloom of the further shore and Nocturnia lightly mocked him as she paddled away. The mist of moonlight about her figure whimsically fashioned itself into a shower of roses as Marietta's words, "the Signorina Beatrice will be home this week. Our *padrone* at the villa has said it!" flashed back in bewildering revelation.

Signore Lamberti, unconscious of his guest's disturbance, had turned to Phil with a courteous query. Now he led the way through a door at the side of the room to a shaded portico, presenting the Americans to the solitary occupant with a stately, old-fashioned bow.

"My sister, gentlemen," he said quietly, "the Signorina Emilia."

"The Signorina Emilia!" Philip Ainsworth instantly caught the winsome charm of the dear old dreamer rocking gaily back and forth in the shadow of the portico. The moonlight of the even-tide of life lay in silvery radiance upon her dainty head, diffusing its brightness all about her in caressing protection of the eternal youth within her, seeming indeed to shield her from the ravages of Father Time who had grimly piled up eighty-one years at her tiny feet and fled at the laugh with which she received them. Kirke, alert for the sound of footsteps, had given her but a swift glance of reverent admiration, but

Phil, in a curious wave of tenderness, saw a frail little lady crowned in a mass of silvery hair; a face delicately patrician; eyes, deep and dark and soft! There was the same vivid contrast in eyes and brows and hair that had so fascinated Phil in her brother. How beautifully the winds of the passing years had drifted the snows of life's winter!

The fire that burned in her dark eyes hinted something of the electric vitality within her. A great Neapolitan doctor had once remarked that her body was a storehouse of nervous energy kept in order by a will power almost superhuman, and that some day the frail structure would collapse without warning.

"What a wonderful little lady!" thought Phil, his eyes softening. "The sable of her dress matches her eyes and the kerchief her hair! She should always wear black silk with a bit of white lace at her throat and always a cameo to fasten it! It suits her exactly."

He learned later that she always did. For twenty years in whimsical obedience to a delightful bit of vanity that had taught her the artistic value of the contrast, she had worn but one style of gown, a soft silk as black and lustrous as her eyes, quaintly cut in the fashion of another time. It fell about her figure in trailing folds, set off at the throat by a snowy kerchief caught with a cameo rimmed in gold.

"My dear," she would explain with a bewitching nod of her head, "I have a little inheritance, just enough to keep me in black silk dresses and lace kerchiefs. No more," with a winsome flash in her dark eyes, "but then, I don't need any more!"

Phil, fascinated by her charm, swiftly crossed to the old sister nodding brightly in response to her brother's presentation. Emboldened by the friendly light in her eyes, he quietly readjusted her head-rest with a laughing remark and seated himself beside her.

"My dear boy," she exclaimed naïvely, patting his hand with an impulsiveness that was characteristic, "your Italian is execrable!"

Phil with the wryest of faces agreed, and the laugh that followed smoothed away the restraint of formality.

There was a light footfall and a flutter of white in the doorway. Instantly Signore Lamberti was upon his feet, presenting the two Americans to the girl who had just entered the portico, and bowing with the courtly deference of a royal chamberlain.

"Ah, daughter," he said quietly, "I have been listening for you!"

Kirke faced the girl and gravely bowed his acknowledgment, alert for some sign of recognition in her face, but the eyes that met his were calmly inscrutable. Once the American fancied

he caught a glimmer of amusement beneath the long lashes. It was instantly lost, however, in the demure dignity with which she received him. Kirke found it very difficult to reconcile his memory of Nocturnia or the wilful nymph who had scribbled the sarcastic message and posted it upon the ilex bough, with this girl before him, welcoming them both with graceful impartiality. Verily her moods were as many as the varying expressions in her dark eyes.

Kirke never forgot the supper that followed — the first of many in the old Lamberti villa: the quaint old silver and china upon the snowy cloth; the old-fashioned room with its high-backed chairs of walnut richly carved and inlaid like the mantel; the rose-glow of the antique candlesticks, illumining the dark face of the handsome, white-haired Italian, punctiliously attentive to his sister, his daughter and his guests; of the Signorina Emilia, Kirke had not remained indifferent to her winsome charm for long; and of Beatrice, a daintily competent hostess whose profile tantalised him with memories of the lake as she bent over the silver tea urn, as gracefully at her ease in pouring the steaming amber into the cups before her as she had been in paddling across the moonlit water or in improvising the organ melody that had swept mystically across the lake. If anything had been needed to complete the picture, Kirke

told himself, it found its final perfection in Lauretta, appearing from time to time to serve the supper, the burnished gold of her hair flashing from beneath a coquettish cap, her eyes shining with excitement at this sudden friendship of all of Marietta's boasted protégés.

"Lauretta is very much interested in the American Signori!" observed Beatrice, her eyes meeting Kirke's with impenetrable gravity.

"Ah!" murmured the American cryptically, "then Nereids are *not* omniscient! A certain mystery is solved and a Goblin disillusioned!"

The girl coloured, fencing adroitly, however, with a quick question in English. Signore Lamberti looked up and smiled at the surprise in the American's face.

"Ah, yes," he explained pleasantly, "daughter and I have waged many a war with your excellent English!"

It was evident that the little family was one of unusual culture. The American saw its imprint in the tasteful surroundings, in the books and pictures that lined the walls, in the old Italian's curious adaptation of sculptured forms manifested again in the candelabra upon the table. The cluster of lights branched from the hand of a miniature Apollo Belvedere, and the rose shades bore sketches of Beritola in water colour to whose execution the old Signorina confessed with a laugh of deprecation.

Phil had fallen into a merry discussion with the old sister; Signore Lamberti toyed with his fork in a fleeting moment of preoccupation and Kirke turned again to Beatrice. Her eyes flashed humorously.

"You must tell us about your wonderful America," she said swiftly, checking the words upon his lips in tantalising anticipation of their reference, "Signore Abbato is very fervent in his admiration!"

"I'm afraid," averred Kirke seriously, "that your wonderful Italy has woven a spell about me. Everything else seems remote."

Signore Lamberti suddenly roused from his revery and turned to Kirke, his eyes glowing. The fire of a proud patriotism had softened the lines of weariness about his mouth.

"Ah! *Italia adorata!*" he said dreamily, "you are right, Signore Bentley. It weaves a wondrous spell. There is no other country like it in all the world. It is the cradle of the arts, the chosen home of the Muses. There is creative power in every fibre of her being, a glorious, passionate expression of her inner fire. Sometimes I think over the quota of great men that Italy has given the world and I say, 'Verily, indeed has she been God's chosen country!' Artists, poets, sculptors, musicians; what other country can flaunt such a glittering army of genius? Perhaps you will say that it is all past

grandeur. Some day, however, Italy will again startle the world with a new expression of her divine creative fire in another quota of such men as Michelangelo, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Petrarch, Raphael, Andrea del Sarto, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, Benvenuto Cellini, Guido Reni, Boccaccio —" he paused for an instant in breathless ecstasy, "what need to mention Ghiberti, Giotto, Fra Bartolommeo, Fra Angelico, Cimabue, or the powerful men in different lines such as Guicciardini, Galileo, Brunelleschi, Machiavelli, Savonarola," he threw his hands out with an expressive gesture. "Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, "'tis impossible to name them all. A complete roll call would engirdle the earth!"

He called Lauretta and gave a few rapid directions. She hurried away, bearing upon her return a *fiascone* of wine. The Italian himself poured the sparkling liquor into a row of goblets.

"A wine made by my ancestors many years ago," he explained simply; then raising his glass with a proud gesture he offered reverently:

"*Italia adorato, amici!*"

In silence they rose and drank the toast, Kirke thrilling at the ardent patriotism of the man before him.

"To your health!" added the Italian courteously, bowing to the Americans.

"To yours, sir!" offered Kirke, raising his glass. He spoke quietly, but his pulse was leaping in response to the powerful appeal of the Italian's magnetism.

"You forgot Camillo Lamberti in your roll call of genius!" declared Aunt Emilia proudly, as they seated themselves.

"My own ancestor," the musician explained to Kirke who had instantly recognised the name, "a famous musician of the eighteenth century."

"To say nothing of Amerigo Vespucci and Cristoforo Colombo," put in Phil reproachfully, "to whose indefatigable efforts is largely due our presence here to-night!"

"We have a great deal in our past of which we may be very proud," explained the old Signorina as the laugh at Phil's statement subsided. "They were wonderful days," she added dreamily, "wonderful days!" and in very truth the little lady lived and had her being in the past infinitely more than in the present, thinking, speaking and dreaming of its grandeur.

"Many people say we Lambertis are a remarkable family," she said to Phil, with a proud toss of her snowy head, "a race of handsome men and beautiful women. In my own girlhood I, too, was beautiful like Niece Beatrice!" And Phil, looking at the delicate curve of face and throat, thought of a fading rose-leaf tipped with frost and could well believe it! "Even to-

day," she went on, patting her abundant hair softly with a quaint egotism that was characteristic of her but never displeasing, "I have an unusual head of hair for one of my age. It is still thick and long."

"And beautifully silver!" whispered Phil.

The old Signorina laughed with pleasure and patted his hand.

"You know just how to please an old lady," she said wistfully, "an old lady who pines for the flattery of her girlhood."

What a dear old dreamer she was! proud of her family, proud of her girlhood beauty, and proud of her beloved Italy. Phil had watched her rise to the toast of *"Italia adorata,"* her slight figure quivering proudly as she touched her lips to the wine with delicate grace. The man at her side marvelled as she talked at the wealth of incident her mind had treasured from the sinking ship of the Past. Her mind was like an old-fashioned trunk filled to overflowing with a multitude of silken robes and priceless laces, all belonging to the past and all unspeakably lovely! She seemed to caress each one with reverent fingers as she brought it forth, wistfully eager for admiration, shaking a shower of faded rose-petals from the folds of rare brocade packed away in the blossoms of memory. There were no shadows in her cherished hoard. Carefully she had put aside the memory of the storms

the Ship of the Past had weathered and dreamily conned over and over the recollection of the silvered strands of the Enchanted Isles that her barque had touched as it floated along on the Sea of Years to the Harbour of Eternity. Phil drew her on and on, questioning, commenting, praising, until a faint flush like the glow of coral crept over the soft wrinkled cheeks. Signore Lamberti watched the two heads bobbing together as they talked with a quiet smile.

"You too are a musician, Signore Bentley," he said abruptly, turning to Kirke. "Your friend spoke of it."

"A lover of music!" corrected Kirke gravely. "A dilettante, I fear, on a few instruments."

"And those?"

"Piano, guitar, and violin." He halted imperceptibly before the final word, finding it a little difficult to utter.

"You will play for us?" questioned the Italian quickly. "We Lambertis are a race of music-lovers."

He rose as he spoke, leading the way to a room at the side. With a courteous gesture he motioned his guest to the piano, an old-fashioned instrument flanked by busts of Verdi and Luigi Cherubini. The light fell full upon the wall behind it, illuminating a picture which the American faced in startled interest. It was the picture of a tall man with blazing eyes and snow-

white hair, his chin resting upon a violin above which he held the bow poised in his slender hand. The eyes looked far beyond, glimpsing the unseen forces from which the player drew his inspiration. Kirke had thought it a painting of Signore Lamberti himself. As he traced the details, however, he became conscious of a difference, vague and elusive, but undeniable.

The violin? In spite of his original suspicion, he now saw that it was not the one that lay hidden away in his own trunk and the discovery was a little disappointing. There was a powerful contrast of light and shadow in the picture — a daring fulfilment of the suggestion in the eyes and hair, painfully intense in its final effect. The American forgot its suggestion of his own errand in his admiration for the faultless execution. The masterful stroke of genius had conveyed in it an irresistible sense of sound and motion. The poised bow seemed momentarily ready to strike the strings in a wail of melody; the mystic fire in the eyes seemed alive, passionately proclaiming the surrender of the body to the spiritual expression of an inner music. A small cross of gold gleamed in the corner above a scrawling signature.

"My ancestor, Camillo Lamberti!" explained the Italian quietly. "My sister spoke of him a while ago."

"And the artist?"

"Niccolo Lamberti, his brother."

The American longed to ask why the man whose powerful genius was evident in the picture before him had not made his influence felt throughout the world of art. Something peculiar in the old Italian's tone, however, restrained him. In silence he seated himself at the piano facing the picture of the man whose name was inscribed upon the panel of the Stradivarius.

Idly, his eyes fixed upon the rapt musician of another century, he improvised a melody that drifted of its own accord into the *Träumerei.* As the melody sang itself from beneath his fingers, it brought with it the memory of Pietro watching him with mournful eyes as he played it once before on the strings of the Stradivarius, and of another night when Beatrice Lamberti had played it upon the chapel organ in the twilight. The singing harmony had become irresistibly woven into the thread of his life.

Softly he played it to the end, instilling into it something of himself — of his passionate love for the music with which Nature had so lavishly endowed him — and something of the memories it evoked. Through the arch of the doorway beyond he could see Beatrice still sitting at the little supper table with her chin resting thoughtfully upon her hand. The glow of the candle-light flashed along the silver and illumined her face. As the final note died away

she looked up. There was no mockery in her eyes now; a generous tribute of appreciation lay in their depths, annihilating the barrier of sex to meet him on a common ground of vibrant sympathy.

Signore Lamberti had listened in perfect silence, his eyes alight.

"Ah, yes," he said dreamily, "Schumann! Beautiful, beautiful. But few can play it so! On the violin, too, it is my favourite melody."

"And mine!" agreed Kirke quietly.

Through the open window floated the sound of a peasant's voice plaintively singing the *Miserere*. Signore Lamberti smiled.

"I suppose," he suggested, "that you have already noticed the innate musical talent in these valley peasants? Melody seems born in an Italian."

"I have, indeed!" agreed Kirke. "Frankly it has been a source of wonder to me. Each one of them appears to know *Il Trovatore* from beginning to end."

"Ah! Every Italian can sing the *Trovatore!*" Dioneo's eyes flashed. "I was thinking particularly when I spoke of an idle, lazy fellow here in Beritola — a dreamer who loved nothing so much as his music. It had been born in him, first finding expression on an accordion and later on an old violin that someone gave him. He used to lie around on the mountain-

side playing, and sometimes the music that floated down from the hills in the twilight was astonishing. He rarely worked, eking out an erratic existence with his fiddle. Finally I grew so interested in him that I brought him here to the villa and taught him the necessary technique. Ah! Signore Bentley, I wish you could have heard the lad play. It was indeed marvellous."

"He is still in Beritola?" questioned Kirke.

"No. He left here months ago. He was Lauretta's sweetheart, you may have heard of him in the valley — Pietro Masetto."

Kirke's grasp upon the arm of his chair tightened. Quickly he scanned the speaker's face, astonished at the friendly interest in his voice. There was no hint of suspicion in the tranquil tones. Signore Lamberti's face glowed with the pleasure of his share in Pietro's attainment. Surely, thought the American, if he had suspected his protégé of theft, some faint indication of it would have been revealed in his manner!

"His gratitude was indeed pitiful!" went on the Italian, his face softening; "he would kiss my hand and say, 'Ah, Signore Lamberti, I had a feeling, a great feeling in my soul, it was walled up here,' striking his breast fiercely, 'like a flood, something that begged to come out and I knew not how. *You* have opened the gate!'"

Beatrice had entered quietly while he spoke. Now she stirred uneasily in her chair and Kirke fancied he caught a flash of resentment in her dark eyes. A faint wave of colour swept over her face and she fingered the lace about her throat a little nervously.

"And so it is settled," the old Signorina was saying to Philip — in the brief lull her cheerful voice could be heard distinctly —" we shall study Italian together and perhaps I may be able to correct that dreadful accent. You will come to-morrow?"

"Yes. And I shall teach you English."

The door from the hallway softly opened and Lauretta appeared.

"Count Teodoro di Gomito, Signorina!" she announced.

To Kirke the announcement came like a sudden dissonance in a perfect melody. Count Teodoro entered, bowing low over the hands of the ladies and acknowledging his presentation to the Americans with easy urbanity.

"We are already almost acquainted," he suggested suavely. "The American Signori, Dioneo, are my tenants in the little mountain cottage. You have found it attractive, Signore Bentley?"

"Very."

"And you, Signorina," he smiled genially at Beatrice, "this is, alas! the first opportunity I

have had of welcoming you since your return. I, too, have been away."

With a tinge of malice Kirke recalled the look of annoyance with which Count Teodoro had left the Lamberti villa but the week before. The girl he had vainly sought had been indolently floating on the bosom of the lake in her canoe, quite unconscious of the nobleman's chagrin. The American watched the Count bend attentively over Beatrice's chair, audibly begging for particulars of her recent visit, and again he was conscious of the antagonism which had stirred within him once before. It received a definite impetus in the curious scene that followed.

Count Teodoro had continued to voice his solicitous curiosity. For some reason, however, the girl was oddly reticent. One by one she gracefully evaded his queries, seeking, with heightened colour, to divert his interest to another topic. It was quite in vain. Count Teodoro stroked his handsome moustache and bent closer, questioning her persistently. Irritated by the man's unaccountable lack of perception, Kirke quickly shielded her from his importunities by a tactful counter-question, somewhat astonished by the flash of gratitude and relief in her eyes.

The whole occurrence had puzzled him. The girl's evident unwillingness to answer had been strangely out of proportion to the importance of

the questions asked, and Count Teodoro's deliberate disregard of her wish had been almost rude. Kirke in a flash of anger felt that he understood the Italian's insolence. It had been the act of a man who heedlessly plans a final effect, oblivious in his self-absorption to all else. His attitude as he bent over Beatrice Lamberti had been one of conspicuous devotion carefully studied to convey an impression of proprietorship. The flaunting challenge had borne in it a veiled warning to respect his rights! Peasant gossip had coupled the names of these two. Kirke, with the memories of the lake shedding the iridescence of romance and poetry about the slender figure of Nocturnia, looked at the obese nobleman bending over her and shuddered at the incongruity of the suggestion. Handsome, masterful, self-possessed and gallant — yes, he was all of these and knew it — but his heavy corpulence of body decried the ensemble.

"And you, Dioneo?" Count Teodoro turned to the old Italian, well content with the means he had taken to define his position in the Lamberti household.

"I am well," was the quiet reply. "And you?"

Count Teodoro twirled his fierce moustache briskly. "As usual," he affirmed. "I have been more than busy."

"Count Teodoro is a very energetic scientist,"

explained Signore Lamberti with a quiet smile, and Kirke fancied that the Count's grand manner had displeased him.

"A little scientific research," shrugged Count Teodoro. "I trust it may one day benefit the world." Careful as his show of modesty had been, however, it produced a contrary effect. The scientist dismissed the subject with a polite wave of his hand and turned again to his host, his full, deep voice booming grandly through the room.

In the full panoply of a superb self-possession, Count Teodoro presently allowed a tinge of patronage to creep into his manner toward his host. Kirke, listening to their careless discussion in outward calm, caught it instantly. To him, powerfully held by the old Italian's magnetism, the effrontery of Count Teodoro's superior attitude, conscious or otherwise, was revolting, the sacrilege of a vandal who desecrates a temple. There was an inheritance of hot blood in the Bentley veins. In rising anger he caught Phil's eye and significantly signalled his desire to leave.

Kirke rose. As he did so a peculiar look of suspicion flashed up in Count Teodoro's eyes. Once before the American had caught a similar look, and now, coupled with his inability to fathom it, he found it doubly irritating. In sudden resentment he faced the nobleman and

looked squarely in his face. Their eyes met in subtle antagonism, then the Italian shifted uncomfortably beneath the level gaze of the American and turned away. Tacitly each man had avowed his dislike of the other.

Outside Phil struck a match to light a cigarette, and confronted the blazing eyes of his chum.

"Phew!" he ejaculated in sudden surprise, "I haven't seen you look like that, old man, since you thrashed Bobby Griffith in football days!"

Kirke did not reply, and Phil, blessed with unusual wisdom at times, refrained from further comment. Quietly he held out his cigarette case and struck a match. As the flickering light expired and Kirke's cigarette glowed brightly in the darkness, Phil smiled strangely.

A velvet pall of darkness lay over the valley, thick and fragrant with the scent of orange and rose and jasmine that lurked in its sable folds. Overhead it was pierced by glittering javelins of starlight and the faint luminescence of the moon rising behind a distant hill.

"Our excellent landlord," observed Phil suddenly, "reminds me of a whale. He has the same physique as that much misunderstood mammal — a convex waistline and general portliness. Besides, he has the added qualification of exuding a sort of oil of politeness from

all his conversational pores. I'll have to ask Tony to buy me a harpoon!"

The fancy seemed to appeal to Mr. Ainsworth. In the days that followed he frequently referred to Count Teodoro as "The Whale," occasionally varying the monotony on state occasions by the elaborate cognomen, "The Cetaceous Mammal."

The Americans sat out upon the porch of their mountain cottage until midnight, watching the moon appear above the hills and overflow in a flood of silver upon the valley below. It threaded its course among the stars until it hung far above them, a night lamp for the sleeping world. They talked steadily, of the Lambertis, of Count Teodoro, of the quaint atmosphere of the villa and the rare old-fashioned hospitality of the inmates, of Aunt Emilia, of the vivid picture of Camillo Lamberti and the old musician's account of Pietro Masetto, reverting many times to the odd chain of circumstances that had attended the purchase of the Stradivarius.

"And certainly," commented Phil thoughtfully, "Signore Lamberti would not have spoken of Pietro in just that manner if he believed him guilty of the theft of his Stradivarius!"

"No," admitted Kirke. "It would be impossible. After all, Pietro may be innocent." Even as he spoke, however, he recalled the hos-

tile look in Beatrice's eyes at the mention of the exile's name and frowned thoughtfully.

They presently entered the villa and bolted the front door. As they did so, a figure emerged from the darkness at the side of the house and crept softly away into the shadows of the night.

Long after he had gone to his room, Kirke sat by his window wakeful and restless. Looking back to the first revelation of the curious old fiddle it had seemed to open an unseen portal and bid him enter. Whimsically he had obeyed, to find himself in a labyrinth of conjecture, blindly following a silver thread. At first it had been but a hair of suspicion, frail and unstable, leading him, a modern knight-errant, in quest of adventure, across a bay silvered with moonlight to a valley of fruit and flowers. In the tropical rose-glow of the southern vale, a little Italian girl in a blaze of passion had helped to strengthen the guiding line of silver, until bit by bit, as he wound it into a ball in his eager pursuit, it had grown into a strand of assured suspicion. Looking back he had caught the gleam of another cord, which, branching from the one in his hand, lay stretched across the ocean to a distant land, firmly knotting there about the wrist of a ragged, homesick exile whose honest eyes belied the suggestion of the glittering bond. Again he had gathered up the growing thread of suspicion, eager to trace it to its

goal until in the lure of the lake and the mystic goddess veiled in moonfire, it had for a time lay limp in his hand, trailing and ignored, and once more a girl, burdened with roses, had knotted the silver strands and pointed ahead! And the man had stared, a little startled that the mocking nymph of the southern night, who had been a thing apart, should be involved in his curious quest. Fate had seemed to decree that those who came into his life on the other side of the unseen portal should be subtly entangled in the line that had led from the panel of the Stradivarius to Beritola, winding about Lauretta, Niccolo, Dioneo Lamberti and the dreaming Nereid of the Lake and stretching across the sea to Pietro in America. Yes, it had entangled Philip Ainsworth, too, leading him across the hedge of fire to the cousin of Benedetto Abbato!

Kirke leaned from his window, watching the moonlit valley patched with shadows, the hills shrouded now in purple gloom and lighted only by the dim effulgence of the stars as the fickle moon deserted them, projecting upon the silent landscape a chain of pictures; there was the old Stradivarius, Dioneo Lamberti with his dark eyes and snowy hair, the mysterious Pietro, Lauretta, the two dead Lambertis of another century, the genius of one visualising the genius of the other in a wonderful painting! Of the

memories of the evening, however, one picture rose above them all, framed in the wood of an arching doorway. The dim radiance of candle-light flashed along a table set with old-fashioned silver and china; it shed a glow of rose upon the face of a girl as she leaned thoughtfully upon the table, her chin resting upon her hand, her eyes full of unspoken tribute to the man whose reverent fingers softly played the *Träumerei.*

And quite suddenly Kirke felt an overpowering desire to know where Beatrice Lamberti had been when he first came to Beritola and why she had not wanted to tell the Count.

CHAPTER IX

A BRASS BUTTON

THE drowsy wail of Niccolo's bagpipe floated down from his eyrie hut on the summit of the mountain behind the Villa Spa Gett. It was a weird and mournful accompaniment of the evening twilight, a melody evolved from a curious instrument fashioned by the ingenious hand of the shepherd himself from the skin of one of his sheep. Three of the legs were rudely made into pipes and the fourth formed the nucleus of the mouth-piece. Niccolo had proved himself a creature of habit. As regularly as he bickered for twigs with Marietta in the morning, so nightly the wailing protest of the departed sheep floated down the mountainside.

Two men wearily climbing the road to the Villa Spa Gett in the dusk paused as the first strains of the bagpipe reached them.

"The last straw!" commented Phil in deep disgust. "Niccolo is torturing that inflated mutton skin again. Ye gods, each night must I endure a mutton symphony. I wish the ghost of the departed quadruped would return and steal his musical hide."

The speaker sat down upon a rock and flatly

refused to budge. "Riley can bring me my supper," he stated. "It's enough to walk out from Naples and bark every inch of shin scrambling over rocks. You're too infernally ambitious, Kirke. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have returned in state with Tony!"

Kirke calmly boosted his friend with his knee and they struggled on up the trail.

"Thank you again!" said Phil gratefully. "If it hadn't been for that knee of yours, I'd never have reached Beritola. It's helped considerably."

He peered through the trees at the Villa Spa Gett. A light gleamed brightly in the kitchen and Riley's voice was suddenly raised in mocking imitation of the bagpipe. The nasal whine, startlingly like the pattern, presently drifted into an erratic song, fitted to Niccolo's wailing obligato, and resolved itself into a weird improvisation of which Gribbins was the unwilling subject.

A savory odour of coffee floated down through the pines as Riley poured the boiling water into the urn and swore fluently at the hot steam that rose about his hand. With the lighting of a lamp which Gribbins had set among the china of the table, the window behind the porch vines suddenly framed a cheerful promise of supper. The Englishman appeared in the doorway straining his eyes down the trail in search of his de-

linquent master. He greeted the Americans with a garrulous complaint of certain indignities he had suffered through the day at the hands of his abandoned Irish tormentor and at Kirke's emphatic command for supper stalked gloomily back to the kitchen.

"I thought," remarked Phil casually, in the midst of supper, "that you stopped in for any mail that had happened to accumulate since Tony's trip this morning."

"I did. There was only one letter and that was for me. I read it while you were buying that long list of domestic necessities which you appear to regard as indispensable to our comfort. It contains a postscript which you may find interesting."

"From whom?"

"Margaret. She says," Kirke read the postscript aloud, "tell Phil it's neither necessary nor polite to ignore us altogether. We haven't heard a word from him since he left Mürren and mother doesn't like it!"

Kirke grinned broadly at his sister's final words. Mr. Ainsworth, however, appeared not to hear them.

"Something," he announced inconsequently, "is lumbering up the trail!"

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed beneath the window, creaked clumsily up the steps of the Villa Spa Gett and halted at the open screen

door which led from the living-room to the porch. An instant later a ponderous knock reverberated throughout the house. Phil rose. A fat and perspiring butler in gorgeous livery stood revealed in the circle of light outside the door. He was a physical prototype of Count Teodoro with an impassive countenance and alert, roving eyes.

"It's the Oily Echo who buttles for the Whale," announced Phil under his breath.

"A message from his lordship, Count Teodoro di Gomito for the American Signori!" proclaimed the butler sonorously.

Phil pushed back the screen door and received an imposing document ablaze with the nobleman's coat-of-arms. The Italian bowed heavily and departed, his bead-like eyes making a sly examination of the room and missing nothing.

Grinning at Riley's envious comment upon the departing livery as viewed from the kitchen window, Phil opened the heavy envelope with affected veneration.

"We have been taken up by the aristocracy!" he announced. "His lordship formally invites us to dine with him Thursday evening. I shall go," he declared with finality.

"I shall *not!*" was the dry response.

Phil seated himself and tossed the invitation across the table.

"In this particular instance," he said slowly, "I think it would be wisdom to accept."

"Wisdom be hanged!" grumbled Kirke. "We're under no obligation to him!"

"Granted. The fact remains, however, that he owns the Villa Spa Gett. It is just as well to conceal one's opinion of the landlord. We're very comfortable here and he could kick us out."

Kirke shrugged his shoulders and returned to his coffee, but he offered no further objection. Had he known his chum's real reason for propitiating their aristocratic landlord he would have been genuinely astonished.

Early that morning as the Americans rode into Naples with Tony, they had met Count Teodoro driving homeward. To Phil, thoughtfully stirring his coffee, the details of the incident recurred unpleasantly as they had many other times throughout the day.

The Italian had halted his horses with a civil greeting.

"A day in Napoli, Signori?" he queried pleasantly.

"*Si, Signore.*" Kirke had answered with the Bentley air which always made his friend grin in secret enjoyment, it was so ominously courteous!

"You will of course visit the Villa Reale? At sunset it is most picturesque."

"*Grazie, Signore.* We shall indeed avail ourselves of your suggestion."

That had been all. Phil, however, stealing a furtive glance at the Italian to watch the effect of his chum's overwhelming politeness, had caught him in an unguarded moment. Count Teodoro's eyes, as they rested upon Kirke, had flashed suddenly with smouldering fire. Had the suggestion not been so preposterous, Phil would have unhesitatingly analysed the look as one of concentrated hate and rage. There had been more to it than the jealous anxiety of an aspiring lover who resents the propinquity of a younger and more comely man than himself; it had suggested the fury of an animal who is driven to bay and turns to tear the hunter to pieces. Although Phil had instantly condemned this fancy as theatric in the extreme, the occurrence had made him wary. His desire to-night to accept Count Teodoro's invitation had been largely due to his determination to guard against any open show of hostility.

Phil finished his coffee and lit a cigar, indolently watching Gribbins restore the living-room to order. Having removed the evidences of its brief metamorphosis into a dining-room, the Englishman drew the shades, placed the day's papers on the table and noiselessly withdrew.

"Well," questioned Kirke, "has the prospect of dining at the castle rendered you speechless?"

For answer Phil rose, rambled aimlessly about the room, opening and shutting the drawers of a desk and peering into the closet, and presently seated himself amidst an elaborate paraphernalia of pens, ink, paper and an enormous Italian dictionary, with the announcement that he was about to answer Count Teodoro's invitation.

Kirke regarded the self-appointed scribe with a grin.

"Is your Italian equal to the strain?" he queried.

"My Italian," remarked the social secretary with professional pride, "is like none other in the valley. You forget that it has been carefully pruned for several mornings now by the Signorina Emilia!" He scribbled intermittently for some time. "There!" he announced triumphantly, closing the dictionary with a bang, "I've accepted for myself in the politest terms and then I've added a postscript, providing for any little eccentricity you may develop, in which I say very informally, 'P. S., Kirke says you can go to the Devil. He'll come if he wants to.'"

Riley appeared in the doorway, grinning, his daredevil face crowned in the terrible towel turban he had affected since his installation as cook.

"His Dagoship lost wan of his beauteous buttons!" he announced.

"Keep it," yawned Phil, "for a watch-charm."

The cook pocketed the gaudy bit of brass and turned away, but neither of the Americans noticed that he flashed a warning look at Gribbins and frowned thoughtfully.

CHAPTER X

COUNT TEODORO DI GOMITO

THE Americans clanged the brass knocker at the castle door and inspected in silent interest the grim walls that rose about them. From the barbican of the ancient tower, whence in olden days the alert watchman had peered, to the protecting ramparts and loopholes, yawning in readiness for belching fire-arms, the old castle gave out a bellicose message of an impregnable preparation for the fortunes of war. Though no sentinels marched bravely to and fro upon the ramparts and the sally-port lay open in twentieth century security, there was an indescribable suggestion about the ancient fortress of the days of Guelph and Ghibelline.

The great door before them presently creaked open in the hands of Giacomo, the butler. Kirke, eyeing the gorgeous livery which had excited Riley's ridicule, recalled Marietta's description of the Count's staff of servants.

"Il Signore Conte?" she had exclaimed scathingly. *"Madonna mia,* he counts each *soldo!* In that great castle he has but two, my sister Therese for the kitchen and that accursed

pig of a Giacomo for everything else! Presence of the Devil, what a man!"

Giacomo bowed the Americans into an enormous corridor paved in stone and warmed into a semblance of cheer by rugs of mahogany red. It was dimly lighted by an antique lamp of bronze.

Count Teodoro emerged from the shadows at the rear and greeted his guests urbanely.

"Good evening, Signori!" he said in excellent English. "Ah — you are surprised that I speak your English? 'Tis even so. The Signorina Beatrice and I speak it at times by way of diversion." Phil felt that his careless reference to the girl had been artfully premeditated.

"However," went on Count Teodoro pleasantly, "both of you gentlemen are such accomplished linguists that perhaps we may abide by that old saying, 'When you are in Rome, be a Roman.' Since we are in Italy, let us then talk Italian."

His handsome eyes lingered on the faces of his guests in smiling inscrutability. Kirke took refuge in a careful formality, but Phil, with an odd expression in his eyes, met the Italian's advances with apparent cordiality.

"It is very kind of you to partake of my hospitality," went on the Italian easily. "To a bachelor of my retired habits such an evening is a rare treat. You are both warm from the

climb? Allow me." He quickly turned to a side table and poured three glasses of a thin, sour wine. "Myself," he shrugged as he set his glass down, "I prefer the cognac. In this climate, however, it works with the sun."

Phil praised the wine with a mental reservation and finding to his huge diversion that the Bentley air was once more in prominence, deftly drew his chum into the conversation and left him stranded.

"Indeed, Signore," protested the Italian suavely in response to a polite remark of Kirke's, "I am only too glad to have this opportunity of showing you my castle. It is very old and very interesting. There are some genuine Giotto frescoes in the chapel." He turned to remove a great key from a hook on the wall, amiably stroking his moustache. Phil, whose keen eyes missed nothing, fancied that a faint smile played for an instant about the Italian's mouth under cover of his hand. The occurrence, trifling as it was, annoyed him. Whatever amusing element there was in the present situation, he reflected, was patent to Count Teodoro alone.

Their host led the way up a flight of stone stairs and unlocked a door at the head. Thence he guided the Americans through an endless procession of stone corridors which clanked drearily at their unaccustomed contact with human feet, offering in apologetic excuse for the deso-

lation of the dusty rooms on either side their prolonged desuetude. His own apartments lay entirely in the other wing of the castle.

Kirke scanned the old rooms one by one, a little ashamed of the persistent antagonism that welled up within him at the sound of Count Teodoro's deep voice booming through the corridors. The Italian before him was the scion of a long line of ancestors whose culture and refinement lay revealed, in spite of dust and cobweb, in this great, deserted portion of the castle, cut off from the master's luxurious apartments by lock and key. Walls had been wonderfully wrought in coloured marbles; floors laid in an exquisite mosaic; surely — but Count Teodoro's voice echoed close at hand and the American shrugged. The ancestral Gomitos, he told himself, had been cast in a different mould!

Through the castle barracks and state court, grim and mouldy relics of a past grandeur, the three men passed to the chapel beyond, dimly alight for their inspection. The light from the altar candles flickered on the Gothic windows and etched strange shadows on the sombre walls. The Giotto frescoes? Kirke stood before them in silent appreciation. The man who had been the artistic harbinger of the spring of the Italian Renaissance had given of his best to this remote castle chapel.

"Giotto was a friend of the — of the builder

of the castle," explained the Italian. "Tradition has it that he planned the Campanile at Florence within these walls."

Phil turned restlessly to the chapel door, depressed by the great loneliness that hovered over the ancient wing of the castle like a funeral pall. Count Teodoro, however, in a burst of enthusiasm recalled him, indicating some old statues of the saints. The Italian had suddenly grown eloquent in his appreciation. A curious light flashed up in his fine eyes, and Kirke, mindful of the feeling that stirred within himself at times when he faced the embodiment of a man's genius, secretly credited his host with unsuspected depths. Not so Phil, however. His practical hard-headedness had instantly detected in the Italian's zealous appreciation an unnatural element. Was Count Teodoro making a pretence of an intellectual enthusiasm which he did not feel for purposes of effect? Phil thought so. The nervous excitement in the Italian's eyes and his fleeting self-consciousness had betrayed him. Reluctantly, it seemed, Count Teodoro at length ushered his guests back to the great hall and thence to his own apartments.

Of these but one room repeated the tone of antiquity sounded in the disused portion of the castle. Kirke, who had been a little displeased by the modern luxury with which the Italian had surrounded himself, found his interest re-

viving again in the Count's library. The wall opposite the doorway through which they had entered was panelled to the height of a tall man in Flemish oak, heavily carved, above which stretched an exquisite fresco. The other walls of the great room were lined to the ceiling with books. Phil, seeking the windowed recess at the side, found his outlook grimly barricaded by the rocky slope of a steep hill, one of the file which stretches from the castle to the Tyrrhenian Sea. There were one or two bizarre twentieth century touches, a phonograph and a Neapolitan sporting paper. In the main, however, Count Teodoro had been content with the library of his ancestors.

"And here, Signori," the Italian opened a door at the side, "you see my laboratory."

The Americans found themselves in a shelved room of extreme disorder. Crucibles, retorts and labelled bottles were grouped about in confusion upon floor and table and chairs. The ashes of a brick furnace heaped about a crucible of iron attested the fact that the scientist had been summoned away in the midst of his work, the red coals of his fire paling to ashes in his absence. Count Teodoro removed the forgotten vessel with a shrug and a smile.

"You see," he explained pleasantly, "I had forgotten the boiling crucible in the pleasure of your company. My furnace," he added care-

lessly, indicating the bright scarlet of the bricks, "has just been bricked in anew. See, here is the closet in which I keep my chemicals and all these are my utensils."

Kirke glanced carelessly about him. The eye of the artist had instantly found the defect in the picture. The apparent disorder of the Count's laboratory was too extreme. It suggested a carefully studied effect to render the Italian's scientific research more impressive. Indeed, as in everything else of Count Teodoro's, from Giacomo's livery to the luxurious apartments, it was overdone, revealing an inborn love of ostentation.

"I presume," suggested Phil, carelessly indicating a group of vessels close at hand, "that you break a number of utensils in the interests of science. These, I fancy, have been replaced quite recently?"

The scientist shot a keen glance at his guest.

"Indeed, yes!" he replied quickly. "Some of them are very frail."

He turned away, and both Americans thought that he was annoyed and wondered at it. But in an instant, he was once more dilating eagerly upon the perfection of his laboratory equipment. Phil, who felt that the Italian had already extended the exhibition of his scientific paraphernalia beyond the limits of good taste, watched him closely. There was an unusual

alertness about him, visible only to the close observer. Recalling the strange smile that had piqued him earlier in the evening and later the curious fire in the Italian's eyes and his sudden outbreak of enthusiasm in the chapel, he mentally added the scientist's annoyance of a minute ago, and now his watchful vigilance, deciding that the malignant look he had surprised in the nobleman's eyes earlier in the week was not the only inexplicable thing about him.

Count Teodoro's elaborate discourse was brought to an abrupt close by the appearance of Giacomo.

"Dinner is served, sir!" he announced very distinctly, and Phil, secretly alert with undefined distrust, caught the queer glance that flashed between master and man, and made a mental note of it.

The room in which the three men dined had once been the castle's banquet hall. The great board about which the Count's ancestors had been accustomed to gather in the old days, however, had been replaced by a highly polished rococo bit of furniture, magnificently aglitter with showy appointments. To Kirke, silently admiring the older furnishings of the great hall, the carved and inlaid chairs of walnut, the sombre rafters above his head and the Italian damask with which the walls were hung, this modern desecration of his host's was repellent.

The dinner was excellent. Whatever the Italian's artistic limitations might be, he had revealed the taste of an epicure in the selection of his wine and cigars. Over his coffee, black and fragrant, Count Teodoro waxed suavely talkative, presently dismissing Giacomo with a wave of his hand.

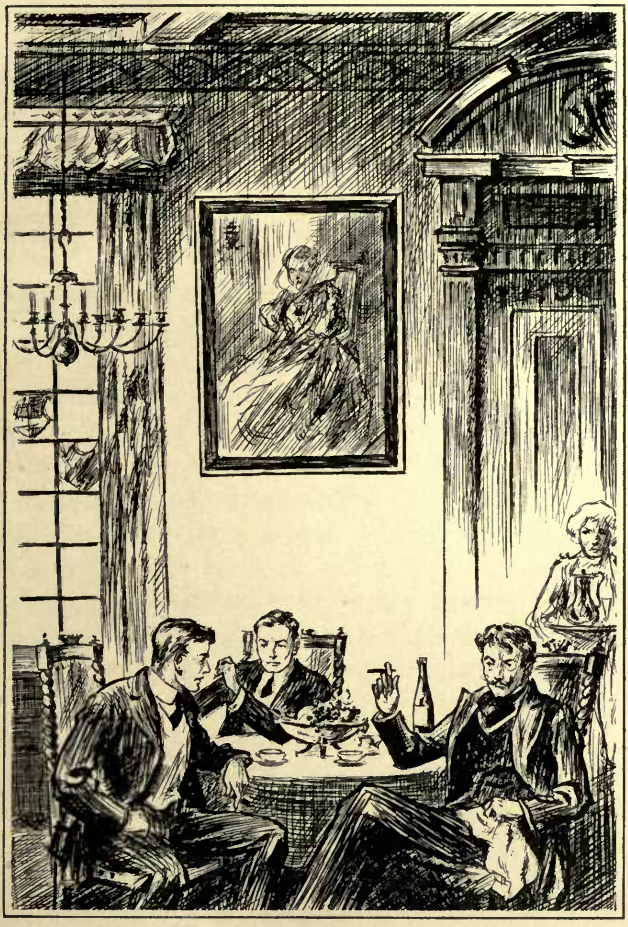
"It is a matter of great mystery to me," he began, settling back in his chair in post-prandial informality, "why the American *Signori* should have chosen our obscure little valley in which to rusticate." He puffed luxuriously at his cigar, adding carelessly, "Few, if any, Americans have ever honoured us with a visit."

"Beritola was recommended to us as an ideal place in which to rest," lied Phil promptly. "I have sometimes wondered how you content yourself with the solitude."

"The valley has its attractions," replied the Italian pointedly, "and the very solitude is an advantage to a man of science such as myself."

"Assuredly!" agreed Phil. He flicked the ash from his cigar and added maliciously, "The charms of the valley which hold you, we, too, have found irresistible!"

"Ah, I see!" The Italian looked sharply at his guest, but found no suggestion of insinuation in the bland face of the young gentleman who had spoken. "The recommendation came, I



"IT IS A MATTER OF GREAT MYSTERY TO ME WHY THE AMERICAN *Signori* SHOULD HAVE CHOSEN OUR OBSCURE LITTLE VALLEY IN WHICH TO RUSTICATE."

presume, from some friend who knew of the great natural beauty of the valley?"

Phil's eyes twinkled oddly. Kirke, a little annoyed by Count Teodoro's persistent curiosity, glanced across at his chum and grinned inwardly, quite content to resign the Italian to his friend's resourceful tongue.

"Yes," assented Phil confidentially, in response to his host's query, "he was a famous author. In fact, he wrote one of his books while he was staying at Manuel Ciapelletto's cottage."

"Great Heavens!" reflected Kirke in genuine alarm, "I don't believe Phil even knows his name!"

His guess was quite correct. Mr. Ainsworth, rapidly inventing a score of plausible excuses for a delinquent memory in event of any further inquiry, accepted another cigar, calmly sipped his cordial and awaited developments. To the relief of both, the Italian himself saved the day.

"Ah!" he exclaimed in surprise, "you know Signore Philip Lane Andrews?"

Phil laughed quietly as if the idea were amusing, as indeed it was!

"*Know* him!" he declared good-humouredly, "why, my dear Count, he's my cousin. As you can see for yourself, I was named after him!"

"Indeed!"

Phil deliberately ignored a warning pressure

of his chum's foot intended to intimate that he had gone quite far enough.

"My esteemed aunt," he explained, expanding genially, "married an Englishman and Phil Andrews is their son. Signore Bentley and I were travelling in England searching for some quiet place in which he might regain his health and Cousin Philip suggested Beritola. Signore Bentley came on ahead and I followed later as perhaps you know, though, perhaps, I should not have allowed him to travel alone in his broken-down condition."

"Signore Bentley was ill?" Count Teodoro glanced searchingly across the table.

Kirke nodded carelessly, recognising the futility of stemming the play of his friend's imagination.

"Alas, yes!" deplored Phil, sipping his cordial. "A general nervous break-down," he added sadly, "from overwork. Signore Bentley is an artist of exceptional ability."

The biographer omitted to add that his prostrated artist, whose ability was indeed exceptional, had not touched brush to canvas since the days he had spent with the great Salvatore, ambitiously planning a life's work that had since been curiously perverted.

"When he finished his last picture," continued this American Munchausen imperturbably, polishing his literary narrative into invincible

perfection, "the doctors said he must give up work immediately and live for an indefinite period in a quiet place. There, my dear Count, you have the cause of our invasion!"

"Ananias," reflected Kirke, "never fully realised the possibilities of his art. *Ben trovato!*"

"And Signore Bentley is feeling better?" Count Teodoro turned solicitously to his guest.

"Decidedly!" affirmed Signore Bentley, smiling.

Count Teodoro pushed back his chair and rose. Phil's eyes, wandering carelessly over the heavy body of the Italian, rested at length upon a horn-shaped bit of coral depending from his watch-chain.

"Evidently Count Teodoro is superstitious," he mused thoughtfully. "Those coral things are a protection against the evil eye, *jettatore,* I think they call it."

The bit of coral attracted his attention again as they made their adieus in the castle hall.

"Have you any haunted chambers in the castle, Count Teodoro?" he inquired, smiling. "Any ghosts that rattle chains and groan at midnight?"

"None!" shrugged the Italian. "The Supernatural flees from the Searchlight of Science."

In spite of his easy words, however, it was

evident from Count Teodoro's manner that he had found the suggestion unpleasant.

"Our host," confided Phil, looking back at the twinkling lights of the castle as they descended into the valley, "is, I suspect, very superstitious. That coral affair on his watch-chain is a protection against the evil eye."

"He displayed particular discretion in wearing it to-night!" replied Kirke pointedly. "That romance about your cousin, Phil Andrews, whom you were named after —"

"Perfectly true!" affirmed Phil with a grin. "I've read somewhere that the gifted cousin whom I so generously adopted to-night has passed the half-century mark. Naturally enough, I was named after him — a number of years after!"

In silence they climbed the trail to the Villa Spa Gett. Phil was busily sorting over the pieces of a very incomplete puzzle. Count Teodoro's fleeting annoyance in the laboratory — certainly the careless indication of the new utensils had not warranted it! — Giacomo's timely announcement of dinner, and the strange glance that had passed between master and man, the undercurrent of excitement that had revealed itself in the chapel and later in the laboratory; were they all pieces of the same puzzle? Would its solution involve the strange look the Ital-

ian had cast at Kirke, and the flickering amusement about his mouth in the castle hall?

Or after all, were they perhaps trifling occurrences elevated to importance by his own dislike and hostility?

Certainly not the latter, promptly decided Mr. Ainsworth.

CHAPTER XI

NICCOLO'S VISITOR

THE dawn had come in a heavy grey mist which shrouded the valley and warned the waking earth of the heat to follow. A wonderful glow of rose and gold suddenly illumined the east and as the growing radiance flashed shafts of iridescence through the fog, the Goddess of the Dawn daintily discarded her mantle of mist and stood revealed in the splendour of the sunrise. The delicate mother-of-pearl that had been the sky's harbinger of the rising sun became a brilliant flush of colour, and the cold mauve that had tipped the hills warmed into glorious sapphire.

In the Villa Spa Gett the Americans were aroused by a curiously familiar sound beneath their windows. It gradually resolved itself into a pair of voices fiercely berating each other. Phil rose and peered from the window, summoning Kirke in an amused undertone. Marietta, in an excess of zeal, was following Niccolo step by step as he retreated to his eyrie hut on the summit of the mountain.

The cause was evident. Niccolo had collected a bundle of twigs so enormous that his feminine

rival was powerless to duplicate it by reason of a sheer physical inability to bear the weight. The little brown woman had worked herself up to a wild pitch of excitement in resenting his victory, and, loathe to leave the unchivalrous twig-gatherer to the enjoyment of his success, had steadily followed him up the trail to the Villa Spa Gett, an occurrence as unprecedented as the cause.

"Niccolo," she taunted fiercely, "I shall come in the night and stick a pin in that accursed bagpipe of yours. Each night its godless noise disturbs me!"

"*Corpo!*" ejaculated the *pecorajo* philosophically, "much good may it do you. I kill me another sheep. I have a quantity of excellent mutton for some time and a new bagpipe, and until it becomes improved by age, its sounds will be most terrible!"

"Epictetus!" murmured Kirke with a grin.

"'Tis already most terrible!" cried Marietta, angered by his persistent coolness. "The Devil himself could do no worse." She suddenly laid down her own bundle of twigs and, wriggling her fingers about an imaginary bagpipe, danced wildly about, distorting her face and making strange, hideous noises in unflattering imitation of her musical rival. "'Tis so it sounds," she declared flatly.

Niccolo laughed heartily. His ridicule

spurred her on, and in furious tones she added, "The bagpipe is an unchristian instrument. It was made to torture us like a pest!"

"*Mache!*" averred Niccolo with cool sarcasm, "it is safer than a violin, and it gets one in no trouble so that he must needs run away!"

"Pietro did not run away. Niccolo, you lie!"

Kirke leaned forward, intent upon the argument which had turned again to the subject of such vital interest to himself.

"He went in the night!" declared Niccolo. "He said good-bye to no one!"

"The *padrone* at the villa does not think of him as you do."

"The *padrone,*" asserted Niccolo loftily, "thinks each man as good as himself. 'Tis impossible!"

"Nevertheless," suddenly burst out Marietta, feeling that she was being worsted, and with true feminine instinct returning to the subject that was most likely to annoy her antagonist, "the bagpipe is an accursed pest and the player a robber who robs the valley of the quiet that comes with the twilight!"

"Your matchless Pietro was wont to play upon the hills in the twilight!"

"That's different. Pietro had the music of the gods. You have but the squeal of accursed pigs."

Stung out of his philosophical calm by the taunting reference to an accomplishment in which he took secret pride, Niccolo burst into sudden anger.

"Squealing of pigs, mayhap, but it brings no stranger of the law to Beritola in search of me!"

"'Tis but a matter of time," scoffed Marietta, "before the law will come and forbid the godless noises we nightly hear!" and then in sudden comprehension of the veiled scorn in her rival's voice she added angrily, "nor did any stranger of the law come in search of Pietro. Your accursed lies will hang you yet, Niccolo."

"The hangman's rope will close my ears to the sound of your voice!" averred the shepherd angrily, "and 'twould perhaps be worth it. You say the law did not reach out its arm for Pietro? You know not. Two, three nights after the American Signore came to Beritola, a stranger came late at night to my hut. 'Niccolo,' he said — and Body of Bacchus! I know not how he knew my name! — 'you will tell me for this gold piece where Pietro Masetto is reported to have gone.' It is not my way to point out the hunted animal to the sniffing dogs, but I looked at the gold piece and well knowing that it is a long arm that reaches across the ocean, I said, ''Tis reported that he is in America.' 'I had

thought so,' said the stranger; 'twould be worth another gold piece if I knew for sure.' 'You may know for sure,' I told him, 'for Marietta's Lauretta has a letter from him stamped with the word America across the face.' He paid me two gold pieces and departed in the darkness whence he had come, not, however, before he had cautioned me to keep silence, and you, Marietta, with your accursed tongue have led me to betray it after a silence of weeks!"

"You know not that it was a *sbirro!*" flashed Marietta suddenly.

"The law knows everything and it has much gold. The stranger knew my name, though I had never seen him before, and his pockets were lined with gold. *Mache!* he is the law! Mind you, Marietta, if you repeat what I have said in my anger, I will play upon the bagpipe all night beneath your window!"

With a parting imprecation of disgust at his own loss of temper, Niccolo strode on up the mountain, and Marietta, her brown face wrinkling up into a fiendish grin of delight at his apparent disturbance, suddenly burst into song.

"*Addio, mio caro amore,*" she sang in tantalising derision as she descended the mountain beneath her bundle of twigs —

"*Un amplesso, e poscia addio,*
Non v'ha pena — non v'ha dolore —"

The voice died away. Kirke looked gravely at his companion.

"So," he said quietly, "a stranger has been inquiring for Pietro Masetto since my arrival in Beritola. What do you make of that?"

"Certainly not the law, as Niccolo asserts!" declared Phil decidedly. "Any inquiry of that sort, it seems to me, would have been made immediately after the disappearance of Pietro eight months ago."

Kirke sighed.

"I wish," he said, "that I knew the identity of Niccolo's stranger and whence he came!"

Fresh from their morning plunge in the lake, the Americans strode briskly up the valley, planning a long walk before breakfast. They climbed to the ridge of a mountain at the north and, far above the gabled village, watched the sunlit valley awake to the activity of day. The early morning was murmurous with the chirp of forest birds and the rustling of leaves. Kirke, alive to the music of the bird-chatter about him, caught the sound of crackling underbrush, and turning, confronted the smiling face of Beatrice Lamberti.

"I watched you climbing," she said gaily, "and planned to invite you both to breakfast. But you look entirely too hungry!"

"Alas for the duplicity of the human coun-

tenance!" bemoaned Phil. "I am as delicately desirous of food as a canary bird."

"Then you may come to breakfast," she granted with mock graciousness, "and you, Signore Bentley?"

"Both truthful and hungry!" avowed Signore Bentley gravely.

"I thought," she observed demurely, "that you were peculiarly immune to the pangs of hunger!"

"Only at twilight!" she was instantly assured, and Phil, looking from one to the other, was a little mystified by their laughing raillery.

"The Dawn is very capricious these summer mornings," the girl said whimsically, as they followed the mountain pathway down to the valley. "She stole down from the hills this morning in the guise of a monk, cloaked and hooded in deepest grey, a devout penitent telling her beads in drops of dew, but when at last she threw aside the cloak in which she had been masquerading, she stood revealed in the very splendour of a Daughter of Fire."

It was but one of the little fancies which she so often voiced, and Kirke, watching her as she talked, thought that she too was a daughter of the fire as daintily capricious as the Dawn itself and as full of moods as an April shower! She flashed at times from indolence to energy and from mockery to impulsive sympathy, alive

with delicate fire one instant and a dangerous humility the next. Her quaint fancies fascinated Kirke; they had revealed a depth of imagination and a nature worship which sounded an answering note in himself. "Full of passion and poetry," Phil had once described her. The phrase was an apt expression of the dominant forces within her, peculiarly concise, as Mr. Ainsworth's pointed remarks usually were.

The little breakfast-room at the villa was cheerily alight with morning sunshine. It sparkled upon the old silver and shattered, where the glass caught its slanting rays, into a rainbow iridescence. Signore Lamberti sat by the table, dreamily watching the landscape outside the window. The deep wine-red of a velvet morning-coat contrasted strikingly with his dark eyes and snowy hair. He roused at the sight of the Americans and greeted them warmly.

"I am indeed glad to see you both!" he said simply, and there was a hint in his deep voice of the pleasure their growing friendship had given him.

"Attention!" exclaimed Phil suddenly in the midst of breakfast, "the Princess Emilia has decreed that we visit the Blue Grotto today."

"Signore Philip himself suggested it!" protested the old lady with a smile.

"And the details of this conspiracy?" questioned Signore Lamberti good-humouredly.

The old sister's eyes flashed.

"Delightful, Dioneo!" she exclaimed. "A ride over the hills in Signore Philip's car to the Tyrrhenian Sea, where two boatmen, selected by Tony, will be waiting to row us to the Grotto."

"And a lunch at Capri!" supplemented Phil.

"I should like it!" exclaimed Signore Lamberti abruptly, and Kirke, watching the sudden animation in the Italian's face as he turned to Phil with an eager question, thought again of the Stradivarius hidden away in his trunk at the Villa Spa Gett, and frowned.

In spite of their growing intimacy with the Lambertis, the American had felt a curious reticence on the subject of the old violin. At first he had attributed it to his brief feeling of constraint in accepting the musician's hospitality as "Signore Ainsworth's friend!" But as the friendship grew, cemented by a letter from Benedetto Abbato to his cousin, in which the enthusiastic little man lauded Philip Ainsworth, Sr., to the skies and spoke of the Bentleys as "one of the first families of America, my dear Dioneo," the warmth of the old Italian's hospitality had speedily banished the shadow. Still, for some reason Kirke himself could not understand, the reticence remained, and the

subject of the violin was studiously avoided. Once in vague alarm he had even warned Phil, fearful lest his friend might disclose the story of his purchase to the old Signorina.

To-day the thought of the Stradivarius made him vaguely uncomfortable and dissatisfied. Despite his keen desire to know the circumstances of its original disposal, the days had glided by one by one leaving him none the wiser. Now a stranger who had paid for knowledge of Pietro Masetto had appeared entangled in the silver thread to which the American had fancifully likened his quest, and his presence seemed to knot it into bewildering complexity.

And as they rose from the breakfast table, Kirke mentally repeated the words he had uttered to Phil earlier in the morning.

"I wish," he sighed, "that I knew the identity of Niccolo's stranger and whence he came!"

CHAPTER XII

ON THE CLIFFS

RILEY received the news of the proposed excursion with a howl of delight, rejoicing in his temporary emancipation from the kitchen. It was answered at the bottom of the trail by another yell which appeared to evolve itself from a clatter of loose boards as Tony, recognising the voice of the Irishman whom he regarded as a kindred spirit, dashed up the mountain road, rattling indiscriminately over stones and rocks with scant respect for his decrepit cart. He alighted with a spring which set the feather in his hat to bobbing drunkenly — spread out his scarlet tie in deference to the honour of his reception by the two Americans instead of the solemn Englishman with the watch-chain, and presented the mail and papers with a profound bow, flashing his handsome teeth in a broad grin.

In response to Kirke's inquiry, it speedily developed that Tony himself, for a consideration which he would leave entirely to the generous discrimination of his employer, would row *Eccellenza* to the Blue Grotto and bring with him another boatman whose qualifications as a

mariner were second only to his own. As for himself, well, the navigation of the Tyrrhenian Sea demanded a peculiar genius, and Tony, with his usual frank versatility, was the one man in all Italy who possessed that genius in a high degree. In this, however, as in all other branches of business involving the accumulation of the golden medium of commerce, he was a much persecuted man owing to that little conspiracy, which he had already mentioned to *Eccellenza,* among the government heads to prevent him from acquiring even the smallest coin unless a generous foreigner took compassion upon him. Indeed he had been assured more than once by those who knew that the maritime authorities would long ago have made use of his remarkable scientific knowledge of navigation as the captain of the largest and swiftest Italian liner in the country but for the insidious pressure of those accursed conspirators!

A suitable inn in Capri for luncheon? It was a strange and notable fact that *Eccellenza* invariably questioned him upon subjects of which with all modesty he might claim a better knowledge than any other man in Italy. Should he ever overcome the unreasonable prejudice against him at court, and a commission should be appointed to explain the general condition of inns throughout Italy in general and Capri in particular, Tony would undoubtedly be

the head of that commission owing to his extraordinary powers of observation, inherited from his mother, and the reliable quality intimated in the cognomen, Truthful Tony — inherited from no one, he proudly explained. It was a direct and logical result of an over-conscientious nature.

Kirke with difficulty controlled his face as the irresponsible Italian described his unusual aptitude. At the conclusion he gravely suggested that he had deemed the trip to the Grotto rather strenuous for a man who had decided to be very careful of his strength during the summer months, whereupon the Italian informed him, with a dare-devil grin on his handsome face, that he had just finished a bottle of medicine of such extraordinary excellence that but for his obligation to furnish *Eccellenza* each morning with his papers and mail, he would long ago have taken advantage of its tonic results to become a prize-fighter, well knowing that he could speedily rise to the top of his profession!

Phil, delighted with the magnificent scale of Tony's mental machinations, would have encouraged him indefinitely, but Kirke, well knowing the difficulty of stemming the tide when it set in in this fashion, peremptorily brought the arrangements to a definite conclusion.

Si! Tony would meet *Eccellenza's* party at eleven o'clock, a mile and a half up the coast from

the Beritola road where he had once discovered a spot peculiarly fitted for embarkation. *Si!* he would bring with him that human reflection of his own greatness and two excellent boats.

"And mind you, Tony," advised Kirke sternly, "see that the boats are in a different class from that cart! There will be ladies with us."

The Italian received the information with an impudent wink and a nod of his head, intimating that he had already suspected the identity of *Eccellenza's* choice. He added gravely that *Eccellenza* need have no fear of the boats for — and this was in the nature of a veiled reproach — although the cart was an excellent one and anyone who had any knowledge of the subject equal to his own could see that for himself, it was plainly built for the vicissitudes of land and its naval counterpart would no doubt be a trifle leaky.

"Undoubtedly!" agreed Kirke with the utmost gravity, and the Italian proceeded to add that if any leaks should develop, owing to the malicious tampering of his official enemies who were most perniciously ingenious, *Eccellenza* need feel no alarm whatever, for in the mending of leaks, as in all other things, Tony himself was an adept, etc., etc.

But Kirke peremptorily checked the exposition of the driver's new accomplishment with a

stern command to have the boats perfect or forfeit his fee, and Tony, nodding a frantic assent, drove wildly off, increasing his usual speed that he might punctually keep his appointment with *Eccellenza,* and making such a terrific racket with his cart that Kirke felt a growing distrust in the Neapolitan's chances of reaching his native city alive.

At ten-thirty Riley drove up to the Lamberti villa, bearing on his watch-chain a decorative concession to the festal nature of the day in the form of Giacomo's brass button. It was consistently fastened by a knot of grocer's cord in the Italian colours.

The old Signorina was in a state of excitement and delight which the others soon found contagious. Riley, turning to assure himself that the little party was safely seated, found her appreciation of his beloved Panhard irresistible, and with a magnificent indifference to Italian speed limits proceeded to demonstrate its merits.

The big car whirred and hummed, the great lamps catching the sun in blinding flashes. The breeze ruffled the old Signorina's hair into a mist about her face; it lashed the wrinkled cheeks into a soft coral and sent the folds of her black gown flapping wildly about her. She sighed regretfully when Riley, after a record-breaking trip, halted the car a mile and a half above the Beritolian road where Tony and his

gifted comrade were already rocking in their boats, their faces wreathed in companion smiles of welcome. Riley, who immediately shot off in the direction of Naples, had been offered unrestricted freedom until four o'clock.

"Pasquale," said Tony significantly to his companion, whose grinning face was quite as satanic in its suggestion of truth and honesty as Tony's own, "I myself shall row *Eccellenza* Bentley's boat."

Pasquale assented with a comprehensive broadening of his bronze face into a grin, an art in which he seemed particularly adept. The Americans noticed with considerable amusement that he too was decked out in a dissolute feather, bobbing in a flapping hat, and a scarlet tie in careful imitation of Truthful Tony. That ebullient admirer of the truth was dancing wildly about and winking surreptitiously at *Eccellenza* Bentley, who did not arrive at a complete understanding of the Italian's facial contortions until they pushed off from the shore when Tony, insolently dropping one lid over a bold, black eye in the direction of Beatrice Lamberti, covertly intimated that *Eccellenza* could thank him for the fact that the pretty Signorina and himself were together.

It speedily became evident that Tony regarded himself in the light of their patron saint. He bent over his oars with knowing glances and in-

termittent chuckles whose meaning was unmistakable. Kirke, growing momentarily more uncomfortable, frowned severely at the romantic boatman who, meeting his eyes with a simian grin, deliberately ignored the warning and bent to the oars with sudden daring.

"*Eccellenza,*" he said in an undertone, perfectly audible to the girl who had turned away with twinkling eyes, "I shall row you to the Grotto in half the time of the other boat"—he winked impudently—"and you shall be quite alone in the cave of blue with the pretty Signorina. You will not mind me, for I have a perfect understanding of all these things!"

Beatrice coloured a little but her eyes were dancing. Tony was in his most irresistible mood. Kirke, struggling with a mingled feeling of annoyance and amusement, strove to voice a reply that would suppress the Italian, but contented himself instead with a threatening gesture.

"Pasquale," went on Tony in extreme self-satisfaction by reason of the widening distance between himself and the grinning object of his remark, "has an excellent arm, but it is not like this, *Eccellenza*"—he dropped his oar and proudly displayed a strong brown arm—"that is the best arm in all Italy. Pasquale," he added, bending to his oars with redoubled vigour

to justify his modest claim, "is a relative of mine!"

Kirke smiled appreciatively. Tony had developed a surprising number of relatives since the arrival of the Americans in Beritola. The hotel clerk who had recommended the antique cart, the newsdealer who supplied his reading matter, the furniture dealer who had furnished the Villa Spa Gett, the driver of the van, the canoe dealer to whom he had entrusted a recent commission, and now Pasquale, the second greatest man in all Italy; they had all been avowed relatives of the dare-devil Italian. Tony's claims of kinsmanship, however, like most of his other extravagant assertions, were typical expressions of his ingrained truthfulness. The American had scarcely finished his mental resumé of the worthy Neapolitan's kinsmen when Tony airily added still another to the growing list.

"The innkeeper at Capri," he suddenly asserted, "where you will find by far the best food in all Italy, is my uncle;" then, catching a twinkle of humour in Kirke's eyes, the irresponsible Italian suddenly burst into an immoderate fit of laughter.

"*Eccellenza* is no fool!" he exclaimed, and with a sudden change of tone he added reproachfully, "and *Eccellenza* knows well that I speak nothing but the truth. My uncle at Capri keeps

the best inn in Italy and prepares food for the gods!"

Beatrice listened to the boatman's extravagant remarks with secret amusement. She was quite unconscious, however, of the frantic by-play that went on when she looked away. Tony instantly took advantage of such opportunities to burst into a pantomime indicative of his approval of *Eccellenza's* choice, and Kirke angrily signalled him to be quiet. Occasionally the Neapolitan varied the monotony of his gesticulations by bending forward and whispering confidentially.

"*Eccellenza,*" he breathed in Kirke's ear on one occasion, "I have told Pasquale to talk much of a great rivalry between him and me in rowing that Signore Lamberti may think that is why I out-distance him!"

His face revealed a Satanic subtlety and plainly indicated that for once he had allowed his interest in *Eccellenza's* welfare to interfere with his inherent love of the truth.

"You will wait for Signore Lamberti!" commanded the American sternly, "as I have told you several times before," and with a smile of complete understanding Tony lay back upon his oars, his bold, black eyes plainly intimating that he would wait long enough to allay the Signorina's suspicions and clearly prove to Signore Lamberti that it was not *Eccellenza* Bentley's

fault if they remained ahead. *Eccellenza* need not fear, however, but what he would row on before there was any chance whatever of being overtaken.

In spite of the American's stern commands, however, and much to Tony's satisfaction, Pasquale's boat was but a dancing speck on the waves when they at last reached their destination. Kirke turned to his boatman.

"Tony," he said peremptorily, "you've chattered enough. If you speak once after we enter the Grotto, I shall unhesitatingly throw you overboard."

Tony settled into complacent silence. Interfere with *Eccellenza's* wooing? Not he! It might affect the eventual size of the *buono mano* in the discharge of which *Eccellenza* had heretofore been consistently generous.

The boat glided silently through the entrance at the base of the bluff. As they shot into the wonder-cave, Kirke was conscious of the electric effect the beauty of the Grotto had had upon the girl at his side. It had found an answering thrill in his own veins. Each was silently thinking that the famous Grotto had never before possessed quite the beauty it had to-day. The shadows that lay athwart the water were deeply sapphire. A blue gloom hung in the great furrows overhead, deepening sombrely at the rear where the cavern shelved down to the

sea. The daylight crept through the tiny entrance in a shining path and rimmed the archway overhead. The ceaseless drip of water alone broke the silence.

"The Goddess of the Blue Grotto has broken her necklace of Sapphires," whispered Beatrice. "Do you hear them dropping, dropping, dropping? That is why the water is so blue. It is a pool of molten sapphire fashioned of the jewels the Goddess has dropped for centuries. It was a penalty imposed upon her," she added whimsically, "for stealing the blue fire of the Southern sky to mould them!"

The American felt the magnetism of the girl sweep over him in an intoxicating flood. He was strangely attuned to her mood and met the glance of her deep eyes with silent appreciation. Once more he was conscious of the look he had seen in them through the doorway as he played the *Träumerei,* a sympathetic recognition, irrespective of sex or age, of the same emotional forces in another which burned so passionately within herself.

Pasquale's boat presently glided with a musical dip of oars into the pathway of light which lay across the waters of the Grotto from the entrance like a luminous finger of the sea, proudly pointing to the silent retreat, and Aunt Emilia caught her breath with a little gasp, finding the memory of many years inferior to the

reality. Signore Lamberti, however, leaned forward in silence, his eyes mystically alight with a fire which Kirke rightly interpreted. It was intense pride in his beloved Italy, of which this cave of sapphire was but one of the many expressions of her wondrous beauty.

"*Italia adorata!*" he breathed softly, as the two boatmen once more bent to their oars after a rapt silence of many minutes that to Tony at least had been interminable. As they shot out from beneath the great bluff into the radiance of the summer day, the Neapolitan turned to Pasquale with a broad grin — still intent upon *Eccellenza* Bentley's welfare.

"Pasquale," he announced, with a meaning look at Kirke, "as I said, I have won, rowing to the Cave of Blue in but half the time!"

Pasquale assented with one of the series of smiles with which he had cheerfully punctuated the trip.

"It would seem," remarked Signore Lamberti pleasantly, "that we have had a rowing contest. Pasquale has talked of nothing else," and Tony, covertly winking his approbation at his grinning accomplice, shot a significant look at Kirke which said as plainly as words, "*Eccellenza* can see for himself how well I have managed. Signore Lamberti does not in the least suspect."

In a few words whose severity was unmistakable and plainly threatened to diminish the num-

ber of gold pieces, Kirke forbade any further exhibitions of oarsmanship, and with one or two reproachful glances, Tony kept his boat at the side of his comrade until they reached Capri.

The innkeeper, with whom Tony was straightway obliged out of respect to family ties to have a private interview, appeared to have had as much of the divine essence of truth instilled into his veins as flowed in those of his illustrious relative. With the exception of one instance when he referred to his dare-devil nephew as "my cousin from Naples," and at a warning look from the individual in question tapped his forehead sadly and bemoaned a curious affliction which twisted his tongue so that it failed to say the thing he thought, his remarks consistently corroborated Tony's extravagant praise of his uncle's inn and its culinary excellence. Of his commendation of the latter, he was entirely justified. The general structure of the inn, however, was similar to that of Tony's cart.

They lunched amid a profusion of obsequious bows from the innkeeper, who personally attended them, and later, still bobbing about in frantic obeisance, followed them down to the boats, where he engaged in another mysterious discussion with his nephew, an affectionate welding, no doubt, of the consanguineous tie between them, and sent that individual away in rare good-humour.

The last they saw of Tony's bland and bobbing uncle, he was still bowing, a substantial figure on the receding shore striving to intimate to *Eccellenza's* party, by a series of intricate physical contortions, his deep-rooted conviction of their magnanimity and unusual prestige. Of his opinion of his handsome nephew from Naples, the less said the better! He had paid a handsome price for his brief relationship with the worthy Neapolitan who had threatened incontinently to direct *Eccellenza* to his despised rival across the way if a commission in recognition of his generous advertisment of the inn were not immediately forthcoming.

Across the water lay the steep cliffs of Sorrento. At a word from Kirke, Tony rowed toward the shore where the house of the great Tasso stood, perched dizzily upon the heights overlooking the sea. Beatrice looked up at the immortal poet's old home with a fluttering colour in her cheeks.

"It is Tasso's house," she said, a deep reverence in her dark eyes. "Signore Bentley, it is holy ground in spite of the desecration that comes with time!"

"Yes," agreed Kirke. It seemed singularly fitting, he reflected, that this girl who felt so strongly the poetry of nature, should worship at the shrine of the dead man whose genius has been immortalised in the *Gerusallemma.*

"I have seen the original manuscript of the *Gerusallemma* at Ferrara," went on Beatrice, her eyes alight. "I was there, Signore Bentley, when you first came to Beritola. It even bears the corrections in Tasso's handwriting. There is also," she added, "some of the *Furioso* in Ariosto's handwriting, and what to me seems a beautiful appreciation, it bears the marks of another poet's tribute written in the words, 'Vittorio Alfieri beheld and venerated!'"

She repeated the words reverently and turning added, "You too have perhaps seen them, Signore Bentley? It was foolish of me, perhaps, but I went to Ferrara with my cousin for that alone!"

"Yes," assented Kirke quietly—"I too have seen them!"

"I am glad!" she admitted impulsively.

She little realised the effect her words had had upon the American. The simple confession of her visit to Ferrara had recalled her reticence the night Count Teodoro had been so rudely insistent. Then she had withheld what she had of her own accord spoken of to-day! Had she perhaps recoiled from revealing the inner sanctuary of her reverence to the scientist? With a sudden bounding of his heart Kirke felt that she had to-day confessed her pilgrimage of reverence to the shrine of Tasso and Ariosto be-

cause she had felt that he would understand the spirit in which she had gone.

They skirted the shore on the homeward trip. At the north the coast grew wild and lonely, banked by steep cliffs against which the sea broke in a line of froth. The peaks of the mountain range which leads from Beritola to the sea loomed presently into sight and a man appeared walking slowly along the cliffs. He turned at the sound of their oars and started violently.

"*Il Signore Conte!*" announced Tony, with a queer glance at Kirke and a sly grin of amusement. *Eccellenza's* game was indeed complicated!

Kirke fancied that the Italian upon the cliffs was annoyed by the chance meeting. Count Teodoro, however, returned their greeting with a wave of his arm and smiled down upon them imperturbably.

"I should not mind Count Teodoro," advised Tony in a friendly undertone as the boats glided on, "he is much too fat to be loved. Besides," he cast a sly look at Beatrice, "the pretty Signorina may know the wisdom of jealousy."

Was there no limit to the Neapolitan's audacity? Kirke, acutely conscious of the girl's heightened colour, frowned savagely at the Italian matchmaker. It had no effect whatever.

Tony bent to his oars with a flourish and a grin, adding quite calmly:

"'Tis always well, *Eccellenza,* to play one against the other. Well do I know! On occasion I parade past Peronella's house with Maria Sazzano on my arm. *Corpo!* she has freckles and weighs as much as a man"— Tony shrugged his disgust —"but the sight of her with me is a good one for Peronella. It teaches her that I am not to be trifled with!" He feathered his oars with conspicuous airiness, adding with a deep chuckle, "*Eccellenza* is wise that he selects a *Signorina* whose mother is no more. Peronella has a mother with but few teeth, a godless old creature who objects to the rattling of my cart."

Kirke speedily forgot the man upon the cliffs. Phil, however, turned and watched the figure of the nobleman silhouetted against the sky. For an instant Count Teodoro calmly watched the retreating boats; then with an odd gesture — could it have been anger? — he flung his cigar into the sea.

Phil turned to answer a laughing question of Aunt Emilia's and, when he looked back, to his intense astonishment, Count Teodoro was gone!

The American stared incredulously at the retreating cliffs. Barely an instant had his eyes left the spot. In that brief period, however, all trace of Count Teodoro had vanished. Had the Italian availed himself of that fleeting instant to

hide? Impossible! decided the American. The barren line of cliffs offered no such opportunity unless one descended a series of rude projections to the sea and swam into one of the many caves that honeycombed the coast.

A hoarse honk! honk! presently resounded from the north where Riley waited with the Panhard. It presaged the end of a pleasant day. Reflecting that Count Teodoro's puzzling disappearance was but one of many inexplicable things about him, Phil, in spite of a certain startled interest, dismissed the subject with a shrug and sent a sharp halloo ringing across the water to Riley.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STORY OF A VIOLIN

KIRKE had found Signore Lamberti an interesting study, a man full of pride in his ancestors and pride in his native land — *Italia adorata,* as he reverently called it — the favourite of art and of nature, and the chosen amphitheatre of history!

The old villa abounded in evidences of Italy's creative greatness. Framed copies of its famous paintings, adaptations of sculptured forms and a cherished hoard of photographs which reproduced the best work of many centuries, attested a patriotism that was in reality an artistic form of Chauvinism.

Pride in country and ancestors, however, powerful forces though they were, were as nothing to the old Italian's passionate love of music. He spent hours at the old piano, dreamily playing over the melodies within him that sought expression, quite content, when the first reserve had worn away, that Kirke should listen. In the Italian's more impassioned moods, Kirke, watching the deft play of the long, slim fingers, fancied that the player instilled into the harmony that crept out from the old instrument something

of the fire that burned in his eyes. At such times the American found himself fascinated by the resemblance between the man at the piano and Camillo Lamberti, whose blazing eyes looked down over his violin from the painting upon the wall.

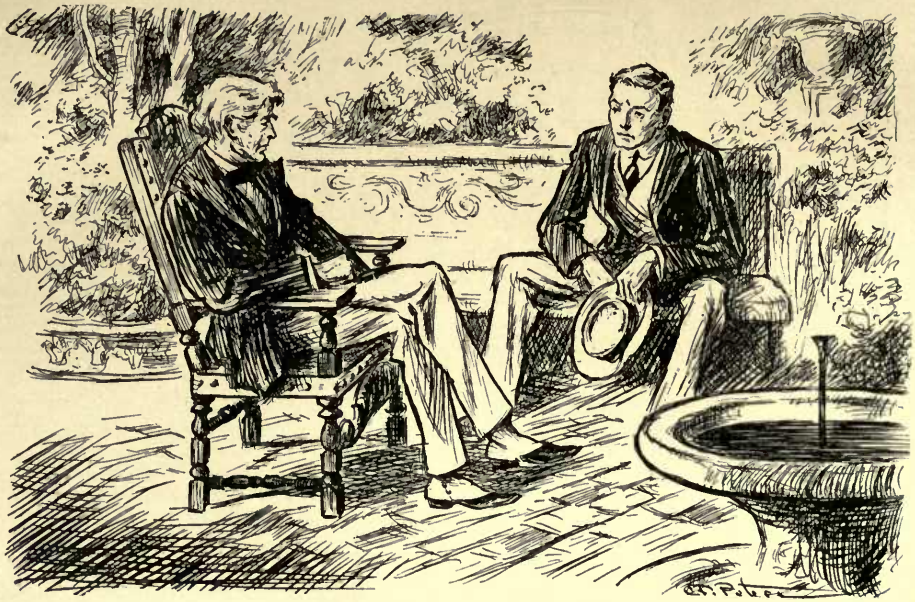
There was a touch of the Southern melancholy in the musician's face at times which vanished instantly when his interest was aroused. Always then the spark of enthusiasm kindled the fire of youth in his eyes and smoothed away the lines of age about his mouth with a smile whose radiance was irresistible. A nature full of fire and passion and tenderness, shrouded in the dignity of reserve with which pride, tradition, and a long seclusion from the world, had armoured a man who was perhaps too prone to live within himself, content with the solitary exaltation of his own dreams. His powerful magnetism won and held first Kirke's friendship and later the deepest respect and affection of his ardent nature. It would have surprised the American not a little had he known that the older man with the experience of his years had been touched by his veneration and, looking beneath the superficial expression, had found its well spring in a pride and reserve equal to his own, tempered a little, perhaps, by the widely different habits of a life-time.

And in their growing intimacy, the opportu-

nity which Kirke had so anxiously awaited and recoiled from seeking, to learn the story of the Stradivarius, came of its own accord!

Kirke had joined the Italian in the old rose-garden behind the villa and had found him in an unusually thoughtful mood — a dreamer in a wilderness of roses. The wind, rustling the bushes, had flaked the grass with drifting colour, weaving a vivid mosaic of emerald and rose about his feet. The quiet of the warm Sabbath was broken only by the chapel bell and the chirping of the birds in the orange groves. Kirke felt the languor of the heat filtering through his veins. Lulled into content by the drowsy calm of the day, he watched the peasants trooping by on their way to the lakeside chapel. The peasant women, gaily clad in bright bodices and bits of coral jewellery, gave to the landscape a sensuous appeal of life and colour. To the fancy of the American, strongly caught to-day by the lure of the South, the picture needed but this tranquil rose-garden with its flood of colour and the white-haired Italian in its midst, lying back in his chair and dreamily matching his finger tips, to make it perfect.

Impulsively Kirke voiced his hearty appreciation of the charm of the Southern day and the old musician listened with the fire of pride kindling in his eyes. It swiftly faded out, how-



"THERE IS NO MUSIC LIKE THE STRAINS ONE CAN BRING FROM A VIOLIN OF THE OLD MASTER'S MAKING"

ever, and left him quite as thoughtful as before. Kirke, finding it impossible to rouse him from his reverie, relapsed again into silence, a privilege born of their sympathy and understanding. The sound of the chapel organ and the voices of the peasants chanting in worship floated faintly to them with a sudden breeze, and the Italian shifted restlessly and closed his eyes.

"There is no music," he said abruptly, "like the strains one can bring from a violin of the old master's making! Signore Bentley, you as a player are interested in violins! Would you like to hear about a very wonderful instrument, an heirloom of my own family?"

"I would, indeed!"

The warmth of interest in the American's tone plainly pleased him. He smiled and lay back in his chair, falling presently into a reverie which to Kirke, afire with curiosity, seemed never ending.

"You have heard me speak of Camillo Lamberti, Signore Bentley?" he began at length. "Yes, of course! He was a musician of the eighteenth century. His picture hangs on the wall behind the piano, painted by his unfortunate brother Niccolo. Tradition says that he had a genius in expressing his emotions on the violin that has never been equalled since!

"What I am about to tell you occurred at the

zenith of his unique career. He was a tall man, Signore Bentley, with the true Lamberti stamp, the black eyes and brows and the snowy hair which comes to each Lamberti when he passes the half-century mark. It is our way of growing old. So much of life's frost falls upon our hair that there is none left for the eyebrows beneath. He was very eccentric, this ancestor of mine, with the title of Count inherited from his father. This he ignored entirely, calling himself by the untitled name of Camillo Lamberti. He spent his life in travelling about from city to city giving violin concerts at which he played nothing but his own compositions. Of the enormous proceeds resulting, he gave every *soldo* to the poor of the city in which the concert had been held, personally supervising the disbursement." The Italian paused and coloured faintly. "In those days, my boy," he added with quiet dignity, "the Lambertis had no need to think of money! Camillo travelled the length and breadth of Italy and his name was loved by every Italian. Wherever he went there was relief for the poor and pleasure for the thousands of music lovers who flocked to hear his original melodies. These he published from time to time, founding with the proceeds a school of music in Milan, in which genius could be developed without the aid of money. The institution has long since died out. There have been

no more Camillo Lambertis to offer their generous assistance.

"He was intensely patriotic, this ancestor of mine, flatly refusing to play before the crowned heads of Europe because they were not Italians! On the other hand, tradition has it that he would stop on his way to a concert to play for any crowd of ragged youngsters who begged for music, often keeping his fashionable audiences waiting indefinitely. They were Italians, Signore Bentley, and he would not have dreamt of refusing them.

"The painting behind the piano was the cause of a great tragedy in his life which, strangely enough, gave a passionate impetus to his gift. His brother Niccolo, a lad so many years younger than himself that Camillo's deep affection for him bore in it something of the paternal, developed as he grew older an unusual talent in art. The brothers met in Florence at the conclusion of the artist's student days. Fired by the picturesque charm of the violinist, Niccolo painted his picture. He was but twenty-two at the time and the painting was the first, and alas! the last expression of a gift which was as great in its way as that of his older brother.

"The artist proudly exhibited this painting of his brother to a girl who had never seen the original, a girl to whom he had secretly given the best of his life, little foreseeing the tragic

result. A curious infatuation seized her as she looked upon the vivid contrasts of the painting and in the end she travelled many miles for one glimpse of the man whose burning eyes had looked forth at her from the canvas. The original she found more than equal to his portrait. Nay, more, the very strains of his violin enthralled her and a great passion welled up within her for the musician whose melodies thrilled and agitated her. She followed him from town to town until — it is not a pretty story, Signore Bentley! — Niccolo Lamberti, with the unbridled passion of the Italian, shot both her and himself, filling his brother's soul with horror and remorse, although as the artist well knew, he was in no way responsible for the girl's conduct or the horrible tragedy that had followed.

" So the violinist toured about seeking to forget the boy whose life had gone out in a mad burst of passion, playing here, playing there, wherever fancy led him, sending thrills of ecstasy through his hearers as his bow struck the strings in a flood of wailing melody, often telling, some said, the story of the dead boy he had so loved and as often passionately rebelling against the fate that had so entangled the threads of three lives. Always he left with the blessings of the town's poor upon his head. So in time, with the grief still fresh in his heart, he arrived in the little town of Cremona where

dwelt the master of violin-makers, Antonius Stradivarius. You, of course, have heard of him, Signore Bentley? The whole world knows him!

"Whether the tragedy of his life overcame him, I know not, but certainly it is said, no mortal man ever before evoked such music as wailed its way to the hearts of his hearers that night in Cremona. It was a powerful outpouring of fire and tenderness that was followed first by a mighty hush and later by the thunderous applause of a multitude rising to their feet with one accord in a passion of excitement. Women sobbed aloud and then, in the very midst of the tumult, a tall, thin man with a fringe of silver hair protruding from beneath a black cap was seen making his way to the front. He was deeply agitated and fiercely brushed away the tears that coursed slowly down his thin cheeks. He approached the violinist and wrung his hand in a grasp of iron.

"'Man, man alive,' he cried in trembling tones, 'it is a wonderful gift God has given you. I am going to make you a violin, a wonderful violin, so wonderful that even you will marvel at its tones.' He turned to the breathless audience, 'Wait, wait,' he cried, 'until the world hears the magic music of the violin that Antonius Stradivarius makes for Camillo Lamberti.'

"And again a roar of applause burst from the excited throng.

"Two deep red spots glowed upon his thin cheeks; he was in a fever of enthusiasm and hurried the violinist away to his shop where they talked far into the night. And so the arrangements were made!

"In those days, Signore Bentley, the Lambertis lived in castles. Camillo lived in the castle overlooking the valley of Beritola, my own home in my earlier years, the castle in which at present dwells Count Teodoro di Gomito."

Kirke looked at the Italian in astonishment.

"Yes," resumed the musician, quietly meeting his look, "that was my home. To his castle then journeyed Camillo Lamberti and that great master of violin-makers, Antonius Stradivarius, where with his own hands the master gathered wood from the forests behind the castle, gathered sycamore for the back and sides, and the finest of pine for the belly and sound-bar, approving the whim of the violinist that his new instrument should be made from the wood of his own forests. It is said that the two men found the dead artist's initials carved on a sycamore tree and that at the sight of it Camillo's face went white. It was the wood of this tree that was used to make the violin.

"Back in Cremona, Camillo Lamberti sat every day in the master's workshop, watching the

progress of his violin, even fashioning some of the minor parts with his own hands. Eccentric in this, as in everything else, he had a certain plan for the structure of the instrument which the master faithfully executed. The two curves in the centre of the sides were made into panels which opened upon silver hinges by the pressure of a spring. On the inside of one the master inscribed the name of the owner and the date; on the other his own name and the date of completion, an ingenious contrivance that Stradivarius alone could have fashioned without interfering in any way with the sound. The violin is the Dolphin type and critics have since declared that it is by all odds the finest specimen the master ever made. I doubt if there is another instrument in the world with such powerful singing tones.

"Into the varnish, tradition says, the master dropped twenty-two drops of a liquid gold, one for each year of the dead boy's life, and with a sudden whim that the violin was a singing memorial of his brother's tragic death, fashioned as it was from the tree upon which the boy had carved his initials, Camillo Lamberti dropped as many drops of his own life's blood in the varnish to mingle with the gold. I have fancied at times that I have caught the glint of each in the curious colour that resulted.

"Stradivarius refused to accept any remuner-

ation. He demanded, instead, the promise that the musician would never touch another violin. The promise was willingly given and kept. As the master finished the instrument, he impulsively tore off the white leather apron in which he had worked and wrote his name across it in letters of gold.

"'There!' he cried, 'it has known but the touch of the best instrument Antonius Stradivarius will ever make and it shall know no other!'

"I have to-day the old soiled apron of white leather and the pint measure with which he gauged the cubic contents. You have doubtless heard that the old Cremona violins were built to contain a certain quantity of wheat or whatever medium the maker chose to use.

"Tradition has it that at the death of the great Camillo his soul was imprisoned in the wonderful instrument he had loved so well and that to-day whoever possesses it, no ill luck can harm him. Nay, more, it is said to bring blessings to the lucky owner and inevitable misfortune to the loser. And verily, Signore Bentley, there would seem to be some truth in it, for it has come down through the centuries blessing many of my ancestors. It was willed to me at the death of my uncle ten years ago. I — I loved it even as the great Camillo himself loved it —"

"And now?" prompted Kirke slowly.

The Italian rose and laid a trembling hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Stolen, my boy," he said brokenly, fiercely shaking his white hair back from his forehead, "eight months ago by God knows whom, and God have mercy on the thief!"

The American, fearing the effect of his own story upon the high-strung old fellow who had sank back in his chair and closed his eyes, slipped noiselessly away. It was quite enough, he told himself impetuously, to know that the instrument had been stolen and that now it lay secure in his own trunk. True, there were knots in the silver thread that he could not yet unravel, but indifferently he shrugged them all away, his resolve to restore the instrument to Signore Lamberti at once unshaken.

The strange old instrument he had purchased in America had plaintively voiced a brother's mourning; it had been fashioned in fitting memorial to the boy whose genius had, in a measure, led to his violent death! Yes, there had been something of Niccolo's wild nature in the vivid contrasts of his single painting and Kirke found his story inexpressibly pathetic. The red and gold he had so often caught in the varnish? It had found its explanation in the story of the

two brothers whose genius had swiftly entangled them in the web of tragedy.

Now after a lapse of two centuries an American was to add another chapter to the history of the Stradivarius! Breathlessly Kirke climbed the trail to the Villa Spa Gett — bounded up to his room and unlocked his trunk, thrilling at the contact of his fingers with the case that protected Camillo Lamberti's precious violin. Impatiently he flung the lid back and the case dropped from his hand with a heavy crash. He saw only the worn red satin of the lining. The wonderful Stradivarius was gone!

BACK IN CREMONA, CAMILLO LAMBERTI SAT EVERY DAY IN THE MASTER'S WORKSHOP WATCHING THE PROGRESS OF HIS VIOLIN

CHAPTER XIV

A SELF-INQUISITOR

WITH burning eyes the American traced the outline of the empty case lying at his feet, a curious stupor dulling his senses. Mechanically he brushed his hair back from his forehead with an odd feeling that it would clear his brain and still the throbbing at his temples. The empty case still mocked him, however, and gradually as the full significance flashed over him, he grew very white.

Gone! — that was of course impossible. It was there somewhere in the trunk. Flushed with sudden hope, he dropped upon his knees and searched in growing dread, unnerved by the horror of presentiment. But search as he might, there was no trace of the violin in which legend declared the soul of Camillo Lamberti to be imprisoned, and as the empty trunk finally forced conviction upon him, he staggered back as if some one had struck him heavily in the face. As in a dream he realised that some one had entered the room and laid a firm hand affectionately upon his shoulder. Turning, he stared vacantly into Phil's face, vaguely con-

scious of an unwonted gravity in the eyes that met his.

"It has been stolen, of course!" Phil said quietly, stooping to pick up the empty case, "but who knew you had it?"

"God knows!" Kirke sat down heavily, and frowned in an effort to control his thoughts. "Nobody, to my knowledge! Certainly a merciful Providence restrained my tongue this morning. Several times I was on the verge of telling Signore Lamberti the whole story."

Roused from his lethargy by the insistent questions of his chum, Kirke repeated the history of the Stradivarius as he had heard it that morning, finding a certain relief in the telling.

"So," commented Phil thoughtfully, "there's a superstition attached to your wonderful fiddle that whoever possesses it is immune to the poisoned arrows of Fate. It's a queer yarn, Kirke!"

He began a methodical tramp about the room, pausing at intervals to stare absently from the window. There was an odd expression about his mouth and his eyes glittered unpleasantly.

"See here, Kirke," he said abruptly, "I'd like to play the detective in this case. No — don't look so hopeful. It isn't because I know where your Stradivarius is, for I haven't the remotest idea. I'd rather not tell you about it if you

don't mind until it's received some sort of corroboration. Will you trust me?"

For answer Kirke held out his hand and Phil looked relieved.

"*Grazie!*" he said quietly. "I hope I may be able to justify your confidence." Whistling cheerfully, he tumbled the crumpled clothing back into the trunk and hid the empty violin case in his own room.

Kirke, smoking nervously by his bedroom window, presently watched his chum descend the trail into the valley and wander nonchalantly in the direction of the Ciapelletto cottage. As usual Phil was bareheaded — his hands shoved deep into his trousers pockets. From the cottages he passed came shrill cries of welcome to which he responded with the good-natured sallies which had made him such a favourite. Man, woman and child, he knew them all and often wandered in and out of their cottages, tasting the strange concoctions of food they offered him and frankly expressing his dislike in wry faces that sent the peasants into screams of laughter. Most of them called him "the mad American!"

Kirke's eyes wandered from the retreating figure of his chum to the castle of Count Teodoro di Gomito, stretched along the ridge in a glow of sunshine. The ancestral home of the Lambertis! Yes, the silent revelation of the old

rooms in the deserted wing was in keeping with the personality of the old Italian who had clung so loyally to the traditions of his ancestors. Fate had capriciously put Signore Lamberti's beloved heirlooms into the hands of two men who had been instinctively antagonistic from the first!

A host of puzzling questions arose in the American's mind. What was Count Teodoro's claim to the Lamberti castle? What had impoverished this family of one time wealth and distinction? . . . Did Signore Lamberti too possess a title which with inherited eccentricity he ignored? . . . Yes, of course! If the Signorina Beatrice became la Contessa di Gomito, she would go back to live in the home of her own ancestors! Kirke shuddered. Well, what if she did? he asked himself defiantly. What difference would it make to Kirke Bentley what this beautiful Italian girl chose to do with her life?

One by one a series of pictures rose before the American, projected before him by the vivid power of memory. The moonlit lake, Nocturnia darting across in a silver trail to her guard of fireflies, the fading outline of the dream church from which the strains of the *Träumerei* had swept across through the twilight shadows to the man on the other shore; these were replaced in turn by the rose-glow of a candle il-

lumining the thoughtful face of a girl framed in an old-fashioned doorway and the sapphire radiance of the Blue Grotto! The sympathy and understanding that had filled the silence as the boat rocked in the wonder-cave had been revealed again in the reverential little pilgrim impulsively confessing her visit to the shrine of the poets. Each picture flashed before the American with overpowering vividness and he rose unsteadily.

"It would make more difference," he owned slowly, "than I had ever dreamed!"

CHAPTER XV

AUNT EMILIA

"AND this morning, my dear boy," smiled the Signorina Emilia, "do we study Italian or English? Or are we going to look over that memory chest of mine?"

The old lady daintily tucked a rose into her snowy hair with a laugh of deprecation at her own vanity, smoothed out the folds of her black silk gown, and carefully adjusted her lace-kerchief with a questioning look at Phil.

"I'm quite sure I don't feel like Italian," he assured her, "and your English is improving so rapidly that I'm frankly jealous, so we'll omit that too until I catch up."

"You were to call me *Aunt* Emilia this morning!" she reminded him reproachfully.

"Looking back over the morning," he retorted gravely, "I fail to remember any opportunity I've had to say that or anything else!"

The old Signorina laughed outright.

"You mean that I've been talking a great deal, don't you?" she questioned. "Well, perhaps I have. Dioneo and Beatrice both know all my little stories of the past and so until you came this summer, I had locked up my memory

chest and kept it to myself. Each day, though, I come out here in this dear old rose-garden and dream of the bygone days. I love the roses and the fluttering petals," she said wistfully, "and I'm always a little sad and lonesome for them when they're gone. I sprinkle the fresh petals all about my room and through my bureau and in the winter I have a pillow full of rose-leaves, dry and sweet."

There was always the faint scent of roses about her, Phil remembered, and the beautiful old face often brought back to him his first thought of its delicate loveliness—"a faded rose-leaf tipped with frost!"

"Do you pack away those treasures of your memory chest in rose-leaves?" he asked gently.

"Yes!" she nodded in quick response to his fancy, "a rose-leaf for each day. When I tell you of those dear old times," she added dreamily, "I seem to live them over again."

Phil glanced at the dark eyes that were always looking down the dim perspective of the distant years and recalled Michelangelo's beautiful words, "That which is round about me I see as from afar, while that which is past and gone becomes present reality." It was true of this dear old dreamer who so loved to wander in the shadowy aisles of long ago. The present to her was but a pale wraith of the glowing past.

"I'm afraid we'll break the hinges of that

memory chest of yours, Aunt Emilia," Phil ventured presently. "We open it nearly every morning."

"You can't break the hinges of my memory chest," she told him dreamily, "for they're made of Love and the padlock is made of Dreams. There's a mischievous little imp called Forgetfulness who would like to steal away the priceless treasures of my chest, but I always keep a soldier on guard, a soldier I call — Remembrance!"

"Suppose," suggested Phil, smiling at her quaint fancy, "suppose you tell me this morning about your brother's Stradivarius. He himself has told Kirke about it!" he added quickly in response to her look of surprise.

She repeated the tragic story of the two brothers in her soft and pretty voice with such an air of pride in their genius that the pathetic little story had an added charm.

"Aunt Emilia," suggested Phil as she folded her hands in her lap at the end, "this curious superstition which is woven about the violin — do you believe in it?"

"We Lambertis are not superstitious," she owned thoughtfully, "but the past history of the instrument and — and our own experience had made us wonder a little. I have often heard my brother say that the ten years he has had the violin have been among the most tranquil of his

life. Before that, well — there was some very bitter trouble and since the loss he has had nothing but misfortune. There is, of course, a more material reason —"

"Tell me about it!" urged Phil.

"You mustn't ever let Dioneo know that I told you!" she exclaimed impressively. "He is so very proud! We Lambertis are a proud race, Signore Philip, and we ask no one's pity in our misfortunes!" There was a sudden flash of spirit in her dark eyes and she sat very straight and quiet for a second. "You knew the violin was stolen eight months ago, didn't you, Philip?"

"Yes. Kirke told me."

"Well, perhaps you didn't know that the theft meant more than the loss of a valued heirloom. It completely upset a certain plan of Dioneo's." The old lady paused and brushed back the silver mist of hair irreverently blown about her face by the morning wind. "You've heard, of course," she went on, colouring, "that we Italians are taxed very, very heavily. The taxes on the villa and grounds have grown and grown until some time ago they reached a sum that seemed to us colossal. You see, the fortunes of the Lambertis have been seriously impaired for years and the taxes had gone on accumulating until Dioneo was at his wits' ends, realising that they must be paid very soon in-

deed or there would be serious consequences."

"He could have sold the Stradivarius," suggested Phil thoughtlessly. "It in itself is worth a small fortune."

"Sell Camillo's violin!" exclaimed the old Signorina in grave displeasure, "Dioneo would sooner starve!" She checked the swift apology that rose to the American's lips with a little gesture. "At length," she went on, "when he had grown desperate, worrying over that terrible, terrible tax, he heard of a prize offered by a Milanese publisher for an original opera, and the prize money was just sufficient to clear the debt of our little estate. My brother determined to compete for it — he is a wonderful composer, Philip — and both Beatrice and myself had the utmost confidence in his ability. We knew that he must win!

"In composing, Dioneo first improvised his melodies upon his violin, and then with the aid of his marvellous memory put them down upon paper. Oddly enough he could improvise only upon his Stradivarius — without it there seemed to be no inspiration whatever — and he used to tell us that the soul of Camillo Lamberti inspired his bow and was trying to speak to the world again through the medium of his descendant. He worked day and night and the score grew. My brother was more light-hearted and happy than we had seen him in years. He

would sit by the hour improvising exquisite melodies, and Beatrice and I, catching his spirit and the fire of his enthusiasm, grew light-hearted and happy, too, for we knew in our hearts that if he finished the work in time for the contest, he would certainly win the prize."

Again she paused and gazed dreamily at her favourite rose-bush, thoughtfully tapping a small, slippered foot upon the grass.

"And when it was but half done," she added sadly, "the Stradivarius was *stolen!*" She leaned forward and laid a trembling hand upon Phil's knee. "Dioneo nearly lost his mind. We could find no trace of it whatever, and worse, in the bitter grief and disappointment which followed, inspiration fled from my brother's soul. He grew melancholy and silent, brooding by the hour over his loss. He made one or two futile efforts to improvise the remainder on the piano, and once he even tried another violin, but he said his soul sickened when he touched it for it brought back thoughts of the other.

"The contest drew to a close and the prize went to a noted composer. We have the score of the prize opera and it can in no way compare with the incomplete work of my brother. So, you see, the misfortune that has attended the loss of the violin in this instance can be attributed to a very material cause. The misfortune has gone from bad to worse. A letter with

the governmental stamp upsets us all. The taxes are long overdue; it is only through the influence of Signore Abbato that they were allowed to run so long, and now Dioneo is in daily fear that the villa, the last of the Lamberti possessions, will be confiscated by a government with whom our family is already in disfavour. There has been no letter for some time now, but we constantly dread and expect one."

Phil longed to ask why the Lambertis were in disfavour with the Italian government. The delicacy of the subject, however, checked him.

"And so," he queried curiously, "you have had no trace of the violin whatever?"

"None. It is an impenetrable mystery to all of us. But few knew the instrument's remarkable story or its value and we can find no reason for the theft. Dioneo thinks a stray *mendicante* stole in — you know in this safe little valley we are very careless about the locks of doors and windows — and carried it off as a means of earning a few *soldi* as a vagrant musician, never dreaming, perhaps, that he had stolen a genuine Stradivarius, the finest product of a master hand and an heirloom of a once great family."

Silently marvelling, the American reviewed the remarkable chain of circumstances that had been connected with this old violin. The Lambertis little guessed the curious links the summer had already added. As great a mystery lay

about the second disappearance as the first.

"And the thief?" Phil queried presently, watching the old Signorina's face intently. "Aunt Emilia, do *you* suspect any one? You have told me only your brother's theory."

The old lady flushed.

"My boy," she said in quick embarrassment, "I — I don't like to tell you what I think. I'm very impulsive and it is wrong to cast the shadow of a suspicion upon a person unless you are positive." She hesitated. "Beatrice and I both think it was stolen by Pietro Masetto, Lauretta's sweetheart. Dioneo, however, will not listen to that theory. He has spoken to you of Pietro's great musical gift, and the fellow did passionately love my brother 'for opening the gate of the music flood,' as he called it. Dioneo declares that if ever there were honesty in human eyes it lay in Pietro Masetto's. He has commanded us never to dare breathe that suspicion again and, though Beatrice and I still cling to it, we dare not mention it in his presence, for Dioneo at best is very hot-tempered. My brother pointed out a very convincing argument against his guilt in the fact that Pietro did not know the value of the instrument and that he would not steal an apparently commonplace violin when he had one of his own. Lauretta knows that we missed the violin at the same time that Pietro left the valley; he fled in the night

without even saying good-bye to her (odd, indeed, too, for he was passionately fond of her!) and Beatrice questioned her, thinking that the girl might have been in his confidence. It was quite evident that she knew nothing of it. She's honest and truthful and loyal, and Pietro's sudden disappearance was as mysterious to her as it was to all of us. 'Ah, no — no, Signorina,' she would sob, 'it is true I can not understand it all, but Pietro did not steal the *padrone's* violin!' For a time she was heart-broken, but she still believes that he is innocent."

"And why does Signore Dioneo believe so strongly in Pietro's innocence when everything points against it?"

"He says that the lad could not simulate such passionate love and gratitude, and that if he really felt as he said he did, he could not have stolen from the man who helped him. Dioneo, you see, credits the whole world with the Lamberti code of honour. I — I'm afraid I've talked a great deal, Philip. I'm getting a little tired. We never speak of the Stradivarius among ourselves and by degrees my brother is becoming resigned to the loss, although at times he still broods. I often wish he could have finished his opera and won the prize," she sighed wistfully. "It would have — have helped us so much!"

Phil thought suddenly of Niccolo's strange visitor.

"Have you made any recent search for the violin?" he asked.

"No. Except for the original search immediately after the loss, it has been dropped entirely. You see, there is no clue."

She rose from her chair with a gesture of weariness.

"Just a minute, Aunt Emilia," said Phil gently. "Who besides your own immediate family knew about the Stradivarius — its history, its great value, its superstitious virtues, its unusual formation, and the part it was playing in inspiring the writing of the opera that was to retrieve your fallen fortunes?"

The old Signorina thoughtfully fingered the cameo at her throat.

"Why, no one, Philip," she said presently. "No one but our own family and Count Teodoro di Gomito. He was very much interested in the writing of the opera and a real friend at the time of the violin's loss. He undertook the search himself and hired men to help him, but all to no avail."

"That was indeed kind of him!" exclaimed Phil heartily. "One doesn't often meet such disinterested generosity!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORM

THE soft sigh of a guitar floated faintly around the northern bend of the lake. Kirke, releasing the painter of his own canoe, paused and listened intently. A canoe presently appeared at the north, floating with the tide, and the American waved his arm to the girl within it and paddled out to meet her.

"The Goblins along this lake are always presumptuous!" he deplored, smiling. "I know of one who dislikes canoeing alone."

"Nereids prefer it!" mocked the girl.

"Self-sacrifice is a beautiful virtue!" came the cryptic assurance.

Beatrice laughed and paddled to shore.

"Your canoe," she suggested demurely, "is almost too substantial for such a mystic being as Nocturnia. However —"

Kirke, secretly exultant, moored her canoe and assisted her to his own, paddling briskly along the shore to the shade of a tree. In the shadows around them, cool, deep pools rippled incessantly with the flash and dart of the tiny water-folk. Peering into the lake, one caught glimmering tones of sapphire and amethyst

which Beatrice whimsically called "the hidden jewels of the Nereids."

The American pointed across the water.

"What a picture that would make, Signorina!" he exclaimed, "those hills in the distance backed with purple mist and pierced by an occasional glint of gold where the sun flashes through — the chapel — how vividly gold the cross is to-day! and in the foreground this rippling lake with blinding contrasts of light and shadow, reflecting the emerald of the trees and the sapphire of the sky! See, where the water mirrors the sun-fire, the lake is patched in gold! If one could only paint this odd golden haze that lies over the valley like transparent cloth-of-gold!"

Beatrice looked up quickly.

"Signore Bentley," she exclaimed impulsively, "you are an artist!"

"No"— Kirke flushed uncomfortably, a little ashamed of the idle years behind him —"just a dilettante!"

A curious fire flashed up in the girl's eyes.

"Do you know," she said slowly, "it seemed to me that first night when you came into the chapel that your temperament was creative. You were so very fanciful."

"Your aunt has told Phil," suggested Kirke, shrugging away an odd depression that had crept

over him, "that the Lambertis are all born with creative power. Tell me more about those wonderful old Lambertis. Were there more like the great Camillo?"

"Yes," she said simply, the reverence in her dark eyes attesting a stirring of the great ancestral pride within her; "among the ranks of those dead Lambertis were sculptors, artists, poets, authors and musicians. Some, of course, have had more of the wonderful creative fire than others, but *padre* insists that wherever you find a Lamberti, it is there."

Her words brought back to the listening American the memory of his student days with Salvatore when he, too, had felt the passionate surging of the creative fire. To-day the recollection of those two years aroused his contempt for the lazy years that had followed when ambition had been dulled because he chose to follow life along the lines of least resistance, floating always *with* the tide. He looked at the girl before him with sudden interest. Intuition had told him the form the divine fire had taken in her! The memory of the bit of poetry which the wind had lightly blown to him from the canoe where Nocturnia lay asleep flashed over him in startling revelation. The description of the lake ablaze with light and patterned in shadow, the atmosphere of sensuous indolence and passion, had they been created by this girl

before him? Quietly he put the question, a great wonder in his heart.

"Yes," Beatrice owned with sudden colour, "the lake was alive with fire. I think it crept into the words of its own accord."

"Full of passion and poetry!" Phil had said. How right he had been! Her quaint fancies, her imagination, the mystic fire that flashed in her eyes, it was but fitting that they should seek poetical expression! Her pilgrimage of reverence to the shrine of Tasso and Ariosto took on a deeper meaning in the light of to-day's revelation. As the devout Mohammedan journeys to the tomb of the Prophet — so had this devout little pilgrim journeyed to Ferrara to kneel in spirit at the shrine of the two Italian poets. Kirke fancied he could see her bending reverently over the old manuscript of the *Gerusallemma* in a silent worship of the forces that controlled her own spirit.

"Tell me about your pictures!" begged Beatrice suddenly. Kirke smiled at the impetuosity of her tone, it was so full of Signore Lamberti's fire, but he flushed as he met her eyes.

With a great shame lashing him pitilessly into self-contempt, the American confessed the whole story; the talent that had developed in early boyhood, its growing appeal in college days — the consequent two years of study and work with the great Salvatore himself, and his eventual

dismissal with the master's words, "If you fulfil the promise of your work with me, there is fame ahead of you!"

Kirke did not spare himself. Relentlessly he described the lazy years which followed, his adoption of the life of the people of his set and his idle pursuit of pleasure until at last the fire of ambition had been buried in an ash heap of indolence and discontent.

"You see," he pleaded eagerly in conclusion, "I'm temperamentally lazy and I've never been disciplined to fight it!"

Impetuously Beatrice questioned his attempt at justification, growing eloquent as she pointed out the error. The man before her had ignored a talent stamped with the approval of the grudging Salvatore. There was moral culpability in his "sin of omission" and the girl bared truths, one by one, that the man had evaded. Kirke felt the fire of her words creep into his blood. The old ambition awoke and surged again through his body. Beatrice had ruthlessly raked away the dead ashes of his indolence and exposed the fire of inspiration beneath. Thank God, it still burned!

The grey shadows of the coming twilight stole slowly across the lake like ghostly fingers. The sky became a sea of marigold oddly streaked with rose. Gradually the ethereal mosaic of colour above the cypress trees faded away and a

nebulous purple shrouded tree and mountain. The cross of the chapel was no longer visible; it had melted into the faint green of the sky above it.

"*Signorina,*" Kirke said suddenly, "will you go to the chapel and play as you did that other night?"

"*Si, Signore.*"

The American paddled slowly over the lake-shadows and left her at the chapel, and again, as in that other twilight hour, when he had watched the fading outline of the church opposite, the soft tones of the organ oboe swept across the shadows plaintively singing the *Träumerei.* To the American in the gloom of the further shore, its melody to-night marked an epoch in his life!

Thunder rumbled presently in the hills, fulfilling the warning of the ominous golden haze that had brooded over the land all day, and Kirke paddled quickly back across the lake to the chapel. The darkness had grown intense; black storm clouds sailed across the sky, turning the twilight into deepest night. Vivid flashes of lightning angrily cleft the darkness like a sword of steel. In the chapel Beatrice had risen at the sound of the thunder and approached the door. The wind violently banged it shut and sent the light of the altar candle flickering oddly on the walls as Kirke

entered, a regretful herald of the coming storm.

They hurried through the darkness to the lake shore. A furious gale of wind was blowing down from the hills. The lake, furrowed into angry waves, flashed strangely in the brief illuminations of the lightning but, during the intervals of darkness, an ebony pall lay over the land. A sheet of light suddenly mantled the valley and in its momentary radiance Kirke saw the girl at his side distinctly. Her eyes were starry with excitement; her cheeks lashed into crimson by the rough caress of the storm wind. It blew her dark hair about her face and sent her skirts flapping backward in the gale. For the instant she had seemed a veritable Wind Goddess bathed in the terrible fire of the lightning. There was no fear in her face. The American saw only a passionate delight in this battle of the elements.

"Signore Bentley," she cried, touching his arm impulsively, "let us wait until the wind and rain are over. I love the storms best. Nature in her anger is a wonderful sight!"

The rain came suddenly in driving torrents, the long spires flashing silver in the lightning. They seemed but unbroken rods of rain from cloud to lake where they broke with a beating sound into hundreds of drops.

"See!" cried the girl. "They are silver javelins flung from the clouds, but they break against the armour of the lake!"

The rain drove the canoeists once again to the shelter of the chapel. This time Beatrice eagerly opened the windows facing the lake and in silence they watched the tumult without grow into a terrific whirl of wind and wave and blinding lightning. The girl herself seemed a part of the storm in her passionate response to its beauty.

The storm spent itself as swiftly as it had come. Nature's southern temper was as quick and impulsive as that of her children. The rain stopped, the thunder died away and the scurrying clouds broke and parted, revealing a moon that knew nothing of storms.

"I have often thought," Beatrice said dreamily, gazing from the window, "that Nature sits up yonder in those moonlit hills playing the Great Organ of the Universe. The sound floats down into the valley from beneath her fingers, an ethereal essence which materialises into tree and bush and flower and fruit. Her moods are visualised to us in the storms and calm. The thunder, I fancy, is her pedal Bourdon and the piping notes of the birds are the tremulous reeds."

The fresh, damp air blew strongly in at the chapel window and with a little sigh of regret

Beatrice closed it. So presently they crossed the lake again in the pathway of a moon that vanished fitfully from time to time in scudding wind clouds. The darkness now was fragrant with the smell of earth and mountain pine. Fireflies revelled incontinently in the warm dampness that had followed the storm, dotting the valley and the hedge of fire about the villa with spots of phosphorescence.

"May I see the poems?" Kirke asked humbly, as they entered the house.

For answer Beatrice led the way through the hall to a room on the right which seemed to breathe forth her personality from the very walls. Over her desk were ranged a line of books, Tasso, Guarini, Mestastasio, Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Alfieri, Kirke read their titles one by one. The Italian poets had a staunch devotee in this girl whose fingers had worn their bindings to a fading smoothness. Smiling she laid a small volume in his outstretched hand.

"The first copies came from Milan to-day!" she said.

Kirke bent over the slender hand and kissed it reverently. It seemed but natural in this romantic Italian valley.

"A tribute," he said gravely, "to the little lady who woke a dreamer. He was idling his life away in the pursuit of happiness, never real-

ising that all the while he was fleeing from it! *Buona notte, Signorina!*"

Kirke climbed the mountain trail to the Villa Spa Gett and dined alone. Phil had disappeared, leaving word that he would not return until late. Out on the porch in the coolness that had followed the storm, Kirke smoked thoughtfully. Looking back, he fancied that the whole trend of circumstances, from the purchase of the violin to this memorable afternoon, had been moving toward one end — his own awakening! His romantic quest in Beritola had stilled the old restless discontent; to-day Beatrice Lamberti had sown the new seed. To-night, indeed, the loss of the Stradivarius seemed unreal; the effect of its purchase upon his life, however, would be never-ending.

The mountain about him was murmurous with the sounds of the night — the dripping of rain from the pine-branches and the sleepy plaint of the drenched birds. The smell of orange and pine crept through the wet leaves of the rose-vine over the porch and lulled the American into quietude. The valley lay stretched at his feet, a moonlit mirage dappled in shadow. It vanished fitfully as the moon sailed behind the clouds. In the intervals of gloom the shaft of fire above Vesuvius flamed brilliantly.

Kirke rose and looked up at the twinkling stars. Yes, the morning star of a glorious fu-

ture of work hung in radiance upon the horizon of his own life, beckoning him onward, lighting the true path to happiness! Happiness? Ah! how religiously he had sought it! Now he knew that to the idler it is but an ever-distant glimmer, mocking and beckoning but ever receding. . . . Yes! he would paint a picture here in this rose-vale of Beritola, infusing into it the fire that burned afresh in his veins; a picture that would prove to these Lambertis that he, too, possessed that creative power upon which they so justly prided themselves.

Strangely excited, he hurried up to his room. The book of poems which Beatrice had given him lay upon the table. Reverently he turned the pages and read them one by one. They were beautiful little classics, revealing a powerful insight. Passion and fire, tenderness and pathos, Nature Worship and the Joy of Living — they had all been woven into lyric form with faultless fingers. Over the silver structure of thought, the poet had draped an exquisite embroidering of words in which gleamed the iridescent threads of a sweet and holy optimism. As he read on, Kirke was conscious of a profound veneration in his heart for the genius of the girl who had unveiled the morning star of his own renaissance. The lake poem was among the number, and one called "The Storm" brought back to the American the picture of Noc-

turnia as she had stood on the lake shore in the glare of the lightning. Suddenly the book slipped from his fingers to the floor and Kirke Bentley faced the revelation of his own heart.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. AINSWORTH ENTERTAINS

KIRKE, briskly climbing the trail at sunset, was conscious of an unwonted commotion in the Villa Spa Gett. Riley appeared to be engaged in a whirlwind progress about the kitchen; doors were banging throughout the house; and Phil himself stood upon the porch watching down the trail for his chum.

"Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed in satisfaction as Kirke ascended the steps. "I was beginning to fear you'd not get back in time."

"What's up?"

"I'm entertaining at dinner," announced Mr. Ainsworth easily.

Kirke stopped short in astonishment.

"Entertaining!" he gasped.

"Assuredly. Hurry up to your room and dress, or you won't be ready when my guests arrive." Phil vanished into the house without further explanation.

Thoroughly mystified, Kirke obeyed. Long before he had arrived at a lucid explanation of his chum's sudden desire to entertain, however, there were footsteps on the villa porch and Kirke descended the stairs in time to see Phil

greet the Lambertis and Count Teodoro di Gomito.

Kirke, annoyed and astonished by the Count's presence, greeted him with cold courtesy. Frequent contact at the villa with the Italian had not mitigated his antagonism. Indeed the two men greeted each other invariably with a punctilious courtesy that was much too politely perfect to be sincere. Kirke had found in Count Teodoro's occasional air of smiling condescension toward Signore Lamberti an added impetus to his growing dislike.

The old Signorina was leaning grandly upon her brother's arm. Her snowy hair, to-night heaped high with exquisite care and held in place by an old-fashioned comb banded in dull silver, crowned a face flushed with excitement at this delightful prospect of viewing the Americans' bachelor quarters.

From the exposition of Riley's unique kitchen with its giant dinner bell (it had been strung up over the rafters in a moment of deviltry by the hare-brained Irishman and was quite large enough to summon the church-goers of a fair-sized town), and a string of superfluous kitchen utensils depending from the ceiling, to the bedrooms with their grotesque frescoes and Kirke's new studio, luxuriously accoutred, she was genuinely delighted. Phil, watching her later as they seated themselves at dinner, saw that the

kerchief at her throat to-night was of priceless lace, as filmy as a cobweb and a century old, and the gold-rimmed cameo was one of exquisite workmanship which she had proudly exhibited to him once before as an heirloom.

To-night, in his enjoyment of the Americans' hospitality, Signore Lamberti's face gradually lost much of the weariness and sadness which had of late overshadowed it, and soon his growing animation rendered the remarkable resemblance between himself and his old sister even more apparent. It was much less evident when the brother's countenance bore the melancholy imprint of his troubled life. Kirke, glancing across at the old Signorina, whose tranquil face revealed nothing of the storms of life she too had weathered, felt an increased respect for her unfailing optimism and good-humour. What a remarkable resemblance there was, indeed, in all three of these Lamberti faces!

The hum of conversation about the dinner table presently became general. It turned, in lighter vein, to a discussion of ghosts and their alleged manifestations. Kirke, in the light of future events, recalled that Phil had tactfully led the old Signorina to introduce the subject; although at the time it had seemed but the natural channel of their rambling discourse.

"I am surprised to hear that there are no indications of ghosts at the castle," observed Kirke,

turning to Signore Lamberti. "A castle without a ghost is unique."

"But there have been a great many stories of ghosts in the castle!" exclaimed Beatrice. "You, *padre,* have told me."

"Yes, there have been a great many stories," agreed Dioneo Lamberti thoughtfully. "One, I believe, as recent as 1860. The last one concerned a Lamberti who was shot in the library of the castle by an enemy."

Count Teodoro remained silent. Kirke fancied, however, that he seemed a little annoyed.

"His name," went on Signore Lamberti, "was Filistrato Lamberti. As I remember the story he was a wonderful performer upon the flute. Tradition has it that he was shot down in the castle library while playing upon the instrument he so loved and that one can often hear him attempting to finish the strains his death interrupted. Of course it's merely a story. But my father, who inherited the castle at his death, believed it and often declared that if any disaster were about to occur, you could invariably hear the wild, sweet tones of Filistrato Lamberti's flute as he played over and over the interrupted melody."

Was it fancy, or had Count Teodoro's handsome face gone white?

"What was the thing this mythical ghost played, Dioneo?" he asked abruptly.

"The *Miserere* from *Il Trovatore,* I believe. Tradition has it that it was his favourite melody."

The hand that carelessly stroked Count Teodoro's moustache was shaking violently. Kirke saw it distinctly. His voice, however, was well controlled and airily indifferent to the castle-ghosts.

"At any rate," he commented drily, "ghosts are not for men of science such as myself!"

And with his protest of immunity the subject was dropped. Kirke wondered if Count Teodoro were secretly so superstitious that the mere suggestion of a castle-ghost had unnerved him. He looked over at Phil and caught a fleeting look of satisfaction upon his chum's face. A little mystified by the curious undercurrent of events, he returned to his coffee.

The dinner was eminently successful. Both Count Teodoro and the Lambertis were genuinely delighted. And best of all it fulfilled its mission — a secret known only to Philip Ainsworth.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE INSPIRATION

KIRKE had found the long, warm, drowsy afternoons on the lake a fascination palliative for the depression that still settled over him at times when he thought of the lost Stradivarius. The theft of Camillo Lamberti's violin had troubled him more than he owned. Phil's growing air of confidence, however, he had in the end found contagious, and although his friend was oddly reticent, religiously keeping to himself whatever suspicions he had, Kirke, with a lighter heart, had surrendered himself once more to the charm of his Southern life with an odd irresponsibility that he himself found inexplicable.

Each night now at twilight the American moored his canoe beneath a tree opposite the chapel. The summer landscape of lake and chapel and distant hill on the other side he had grown to love. Here, too, he could best hear the organ melodies which Beatrice so often played in the gathering dusk. Her moods crept always into her music and Kirke had grown to know when she liked best to be alone and when he might paddle across the lake and join her on the homeward walk. It was a whim of the player

that she loved best to play in the dim grey hours between day and night, skilfully weaving her fancies into melody in the fashion of her father.

"Signorina," queried Kirke one afternoon, his thoughts intent upon the music enshrined in Signore Lamberti's heart—"why hasn't your father made use of his wonderful genius to benefit the world? I've played over most of his work, as you know, and his talent is indeed unusual!"

"Ah, Signore Bentley," the girl said sadly, "*padre* has had a stormy life! To some, perhaps, that would not have mattered. To him it has."

"He is quiet and depressed to-day," suggested Kirke.

"*Si!*" Her eyes grew sombre. "He has settled into a melancholy of late from which it is almost impossible at times to rouse him. You would have to know the peculiar circumstances of his life," she added, colouring, "to understand."

"May I?" questioned the American humbly. "I have wanted much to learn the history of the castle."

"Ah, you have heard then that Count Teodoro's castle is the ancestral home of the Lambertis?"

"Yes."

"It is not a pretty story, Signore Bentley."

The girl shrugged. "For many years this whole valley of Beritola was a portion of the Lamberti estate, and the heir to the castle, owning all their land and cottages, was like a king among the peasants. *Padre* believes strongly in the independence of the peasant. When he came into possession of the estate — he is, as you doubtless know, sublimely impractical and impulsive — he encouraged the peasants in the cultivation of their land, organised agricultural classes to teach them the most productive use of their soil and, little by little, as they were enabled with their new privileges to save sufficient money, he would sell to each his farm and cottage, thereby rendering him independent."

The girl paused and shrugged again, an odd flash in her dark eyes.

"The government disapproved!" she said abruptly. "My father was accused of socialistic tendencies, a serious charge in our country, and a strong case was built up out of his attitude toward the peasants. The — the punishment was out of all proportion to the evidence against him. He was deprived of his estate and his title — he too was a Count — and a heavy fine was imposed. There was nothing left to us but the villa and that was only saved by the strong influence of my father's cousin, Signore Benedetto Abbato."

Kirke recalled how often he had sought to dis-

cover Signore Lamberti's opinion of the man who dwelt in his castle. The old Italian's uniform courtesy and old-fashioned hospitality had been impenetrable.

"And Count Teodoro?" he now suggested.

"The castle was in the course of time bestowed upon him for some service rendered the government. He is buying back the land in the hope of making the valley a principality again as it was in the days of the old Lambertis."

"What an injustice!" exclaimed Kirke hotly, intent upon Signore Lamberti's deprivation.

"Yes," agreed the girl quietly, "it was, indeed. *Padre* rebels in his heart, I think, though he says but little. Even now at times the sight of the castle agitates him. The Lambertis are still in disfavour with the government and the villa is heavily taxed. Then he has told you of the theft of his violin. That seemed, indeed, the climax of a host of misfortunes."

She turned away, a little shaken by the memory of the troubled years behind her, and the American, tracing the outline of her profile, the soft sable of eyes and hair whose shadows he always fancied were deeply purple, recalled again a girl mocking him in the moonlight from her canoe.

"Nocturnia, the Goddess of the Southern Night," he thought, and out of the words was

born the inspiration for his picture, the picture that was to prove to the Lambertis that he, too, knew the surge of the creative fire and that eventually made him famous.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ARTIST

IN the downstairs hall of the Villa Spa Gett, Phil's voice had begun a monotonous chant as he lectured to an imaginary crowd of tourists on his way up stairs. Kirke, reading a letter from Mürren, grinned as the words floated up to him.

"Upon the right," declaimed Mr. Ainsworth sonorously, "you see the famous Villa Spa Gett, now called 'The House of Fame,' where that famous artist, Kirke Renwood Bentley, once spent several months. In this beautiful valley of Beritola he rediscovered the genius, buried in the gross, vulgar depths of his laziness, which has since made him famous. The gallows still itches for the neck of the Devil who told him he could paint! Yes, madam, that is his studio on the second floor, yes — yes, indeed! the very place where he conceived and executed his wonderful picture — 'The Grasshopper's Trance.' The title is a fair sample of his remarkable imagination and the highly artistic form it often took.

"Yes . . . Oh — yes! . . . . yes, madam. This is the room for which you in-

quired. Yes, you are quite right. A wonderful man, indeed. This is the room of that Prince of Beauty and Grace, that masculine Venus, Philip Grenley Ainsworth. Critics say that never since the time of Helen of Troy and Cleopatra — never, I say, has such wonderful, ravishing beauty been seen in mortal. Add to this the remarkable sweetness of his disposition and you will not wonder that the Villa Spa Gett takes its name, not from the artist Bentley, but from that handsome, equable Adonis, Mr. Ainsworth! Yes, ladies, that glass case encloses his footprint. It is supposed to be an example of the perfect foot fashioned with exquisite grace. There is no perceptible defect anywhere in its formation. Was the artist Bentley handsome? Alas, no, madam. It was his misfortune to possess the most grotesque appearance, somewhat that of a gargoyle, large, unshapely hands and feet, disorderly habits, a violent temper and a miscellaneous collection of features that were positively criminal!"

The speaker's head appeared around the corner of the studio doorway as he finished his harangue.

"Well? Haven't you besmeared any part of that nice clean canvas yet?"

For answer Kirke held out with a smile the letter he had been reading. It contained one of the incessant queries which usually concluded

the letters from his sister. Was Phil well? Why did he not write? Was he happy? Had he forgotten them entirely? And for all the information Mr. Ainsworth had offered during the summer, Kirke was no wiser than his sister. These postscripts were as a rule received with the face of a stoic. This morning, however, Phil flushed as he returned the letter, turned on his heel without a word, and left the room.

Whistling cheerfully, Kirke arranged his brushes and tried a dozen different positions before the light was entirely satisfactory. Unconsciously the whistled melody became the *Träumerei,* and as the strains emerged from the idle improvisation of an instant before, he abruptly walked to the window and stood gazing out at the purple of the distant hills. Of the memories of which the *Träumerei* was the golden key, one stood out more vividly to-day — the picture of Pietro offering the Lamberti violin to the disgruntled idler who could trace back to its purchase the beginning of the fire of inspiration which now burned in his heart.

At the turning point in his life, the artist was pausing for an instant to look over the road that lay behind him. Far back, seeming farther than it was, in the golden haze of the early summer, an idler had taken a careless turn in the road of Chance. It had altered his whole life and now he reverently breathed a blessing upon the old

Stradivarius which had so curiously pointed the way. Yes, certainly there must be magic power in the possession of Camillo Lamberti's violin! It had brought unparalleled luck to him — the friendship of Dioneo Lamberti — of the old Signorina — of Beatrice, the wonder-loveliness of a Southern vale, an ineffable peace and a glorious awakening!

The empty violin case! It recurred to him in sudden mockery. Ah! yes, there was the flaw in the golden summer — his inability to restore the violin to Signore Lamberti. . . . Would the knots in the silver thread that led to Pietro across the sea ever be untangled? he asked himself despairingly. Would Phil find the rest of the guiding line and recover the old violin? . . . What was the meaning of Phil's odd conduct, anyway? Each night at dusk now he apparently vanished from the valley along with the waning daylight; he rarely appeared at the Lamberti villa after twilight and never remained at home. Once in considerable curiosity Kirke had questioned the culprit himself, to be genially informed, with an ambiguous wave of the hand which appeared to include every point in the compass, that his chum was merely "wandering around!" The wanderer's shoes bore ample testimony each morning to the truth of this noncommittal statement. They were usually dusty and scratched and torn, and Kirke, finding his

erratic friend unusually reticent upon the subject, refrained from further question.

With a shrug and a frown to throw off his growing depression, Kirke picked up a brush. It brought with it pictures of the girl who had recalled his fleeting ambition and later supplied the inspiration for its outlet and alas! pictures of the Italian who, not content with the possession of Dioneo Lamberti's castle, aspired as well to the hand of his daughter. It was a strange little drama in process of enactment in this rose-vale of Beritola, a drama with a hidden motive that Kirke little dreamed.

Impatiently the American made a stroke upon the canvas before him. The thought of Count Teodoro was ever depressing. The contact of the brush seemed to open the flood-gates of his powerful genius and the pent-up tide of inspiration flowed forth at last untrammelled. Each morning after that he worked with the fury of awakened inspiration.

At noon one day he laid aside his brush with a sigh and covered the picture. Outside a great clattering had arisen at the foot of the mountain, and as Kirke went out upon the cottage porch to look for Phil, Tony appeared with the mail and papers, rattling madly up the trail. For the fact that he was three hours late, *Eccellenza* might thank those accursed conspirators who had, it seemed, been tampering through

the night with his cart. Indeed, by the extraordinary noise it made when he left Naples, he had suspected that something was amiss, but when on the road out two excellent bolts of considerable importance in maintaining that stability for which the cart was famous, had unexpectedly dropped out and he had been obliged to reinstate them, then, indeed, he had been quite sure!

Kirke took the mail. The topmost letter bore his own name and a Paris post-mark. What had Salvatore said in reply to the recent letter of his awakened pupil? It lay beneath that scrawling hand-writing which was as usual well-nigh illegible.

"I am glad! I am glad!" wrote the master. "It is time, indeed! 'Bentley?' said the American artists when I asked for news of you, 'never heard of him,' and then I would say to myself, 'Salvatore's most promising pupil — gone to the devil. Either he is lazy or he can't paint.'"

Kirke winced at the great man's delightful candour.

"And now," went on the letter, "it is time for the Golden Cross Exhibition, an esoteric art competition, centuries old, which is conducted privately in Paris but once in every ten years. The Golden Cross, painted in the corner of the winning picture, is the highest mark of approbation an artist can receive. You will paint me a picture for this exhibition, *figlio mio*. It will reach me by the latter part of next month. Do not fail me!

"ANTONIO SALVATORE."

Kirke turned to a letter from his sister. As

usual, the postscript contained a question about Phil. Heartily ashamed of his tardy replies, Kirke seated himself and wrote to Mürren.

"Phil is quite well and happy," he scribbled carelessly —"he has another sweetheart now to whom he carries roses and candy in approved style. They are studying Italian together and he spends all of his mornings with her. Her name is Signorina Emilia Lamberti and she comes of a very remarkable family."

And Kirke, absently listening for the tardy footsteps of his chum, forgot to add that the dear lady had passed the eighty-first milestone in the long lane of years. Nor did he notice that, from that time on, Margaret Bentley's letters bore no mention of Philip Ainsworth.

CHAPTER XX

THE OUTCOME OF A FESTA

"*BUONA Festa!*" shrieked an excited voice outside the Villa Spa Gett and Phil smilingly opened the door. Marietta, resplendent in festal attire, stood without, her brown, wrinkled face alight with the joy of living. A holiday wreath of artificial flowers and silver leaves rested jauntily upon her head.

"*Madonna mia!*" she exclaimed, dancing about in great glee, "'tis the feast of San Bertolo, the patron saint of the valley. I stopped but to bid you the good of the day and bring you two candles to place at the Saint's feet in the chapel."

"*Mille grazie,*" said Phil with a smile. "We shall not forget."

"*Felicissima Giornata!*" (most blessed day) crowed Marietta exultingly. "A procession and naught but pleasures, flags and flowers, candles and candies, wine and lemonade! Holy Mother!" she screamed suddenly. "Look!"

She pointed a mocking finger at a gaily dressed figure that had just descended the mountain and paused with a grin at the sound of her voice. It was Niccolo with flowers behind his ears, a

brave red sash girded about his waist and the hated bagpipe in his hand. Tauntingly he adjusted the instrument and evolved a shrill tune from it, and the rival twig-gatherers descended the trail in a heated exchange of personalities. Phil returned to his breakfast and deposited the candles upon the table.

"The feast of San Bertolo!" he announced to Kirke; "Marietta says it's a great day."

The appearance of the valley bore ample testimony to the truth of Marietta's assertion. Flags were flying from the gabled roofs; donkeys and carts were wreathed abundantly with flowers and garlands of grape-leaves; and the peasants with coloured sashes over their shoulders and flowers behind their ears trooped joyfully by from time to time on their way to the chapel to pay tribute to the tutelary saint of the valley. Nature had donned her best. A capricious sun-shower of the early morning had festooned trees and flowers with glittering ropes of jewels.

So presently the Americans, too, joined the growing procession of peasants with Marietta's candles in readiness to place at the feet of the saint. Ahead of them a speck appeared suddenly upon the mountain road and rolled rapidly down into the valley, the speck resolving itself into a commotion of rattling boards and swirling dust; a roar of laughter and a hearty cheer broke out among the peasants as they good-

humouredly drew aside to clear the road; then down through the welcoming line of peasants came the great Tony himself, standing upright upon the rickety seat of his cart and bowing handsomely right and left. On he came with a festal cataclysm of racket, his air of extreme satisfaction alive with the suggestion that this celebration to-day had been planned entirely in his own honour. Victor Emmanuel and Garibaldi were extravagantly adorned with flowers; the ramshackle cart bore roses and carnations and green boughs tucked in every available crevice; and the spokes of the wheels, bound fierily in scarlet bunting, flashed along like rotary firecrackers. And Tony himself was no whit less magnificent. A red and green sash was draped over his shoulder and his ears had disappeared entirely beneath mammoth bunches of flowers. Now as the cheers and grins of the peasants grew into wild excitement, Tony fell to responding with an enthusiastic series of whoops, all the while waving his dilapidated hat frantically about in the air; and presently catching a glimpse of the laughing Americans, his delight knew no bounds.

"*Buona festa, signori!*" he burst forth ecstatically. "I have come for the day and, by the Shades of the Great Garibaldi, I have brought the adorable Peronella with me."

With a gallant bow he indicated a gaily

dressed figure, in the rear of the cart, with a dark, bewitching, girlish face and a pair of eyes as mischievously daring as Tony's own.

"Peronella," announced Tony with great satisfaction as he halted his cart in deference to the approach of the Americans, "is the prettiest girl in Napoli and in all Italy for aught I've ever seen to the contrary."

He spoke characteristically as if her beauty were a matter of great personal credit to himself, indicating her earrings, the crown of flowers with which he had gallantly adorned her, the abundance of her dark hair and the roses in her cheeks with unblushing frankness. Peronella received this enthusiastic exposition of her charms with dancing eyes and Phil, watching her, decided that Tony had more than found his match. With a great clattering of his cart, the Italian finally drove off again to leave the morning papers at the Villa Spa Gett. Over his shoulder he called back many promises that he would endeavour to see the illustrious Americans as many times as the busy day would permit.

The main entrance of the lakeside chapel lay at the end of a forest aisle down which presently the peasants marched, armed with the candles that one must place on the day of San Bertolo at the feet of the blessed tutelary Saint. White-clad children strewed the path with flowers and the village priest headed a choir of men and

boys, whose deep-toned chant Kirke found a melodious part of the woodland harmony. To-day the interior of the church was hung with festal brocade. At the base of the Saint's image, the altar was a blaze of light. As the Americans deposited their lighted candles beside the others, to the intense gratification of Marietta, patiently following them to assure herself of their proper observance of the custom, they found themselves beside Beatrice, her father and the old Signorina. They too were paying the time-honoured tribute of the valley.

"You will of course return to the villa with us!" exclaimed Signore Lamberti. "It is a day of celebration for all."

All day the valley rang jubilantly with songs and laughter. In the shade of the groves rude platforms had been erected, and the clattering sound of feet dancing to the tinkle of accordions, mandolins and guitars, echoed clearly in the rose-garden behind the villa.

"The tarantella!" exclaimed Aunt Emilia, as the familiar strains rang out from the nearest grove; "Dioneo, we'll have it danced out here in the rose-garden. It's just the setting for their holiday dresses. Besides, it will be a celebration quite our own."

All day the old Signorina had been bubbling with internal excitement. Indeed, with the exultation of the peasants ringing jubilantly in

her ears, she had found the quiet of the rose-garden a little tantalising. Signore Lamberti smiled at his sister's impulsive whim, but it was evident that the suggestion had pleased him.

Despatched to seek the dancers, Phil presently returned at the head of a radiant band of whom Lauretta, Manuel, Marietta, Niccolo, Tony and Peronella were the most conspicuous members. Tony in particular was in a state of breezy good humour impossible to describe. He had assured Eccellenza Ainsworth that of all people in Italy he and Peronella were best fitted by reason of their extraordinary physical perfections to perform that most graceful of dances, the tarantella! Indeed they had often thought seriously of opening a dancing academy but for that aforementioned conspiracy.

Marietta danced wildly about, banging her tambourine lightly above her head and scoffing riotously as Niccolo laid aside his precious bagpipe that it might not impede his movements. The dancers formed and in an instant the tarantella had whirled into being to the music of the Raffredo brothers seated upon the grass. Advancing, retreating, snapping their fingers above their heads, the dancers swayed back and forth to the rhythmic beat of the music. The colour of the native costumes, the unrestrained movement, the banging of the tambourines, the darting feet, bare and brown, the gay challenge

that the women flung back over their shoulders at their male pursuers with all the grace of natural motion, Kirke found irresistible. The dance was punctuated by an intermittent series of excited "Ha!"-s from Tony, who stamped his foot vigorously from time to time in an excess of jubilation.

Marietta's antics with Niccolo were as usual characteristic. If she found herself in unexpected proximity to her rival twig-gatherer, she banged her tambourine scoffingly in his face and retreated with a wry grimace. And Niccolo retorted in kind, the two taking infinite pains to annoy each other throughout the dance. Marietta speedily worked herself up into such an incredible pitch of excitement that she seemed a veritable avatar of mockery and derision.

Of all the byplay of the little dance, however, Kirke found Tony's the most astonishing. Mindful of the boastful Italian's assertion that he ofttimes paraded by his sweetheart's house with Maria Sazzano upon his arm to teach the watching Peronella that he was not to be "trifled with," the American watched Tony and his small, vivacious sweetheart intently. He speedily discovered that in spite of his boasted bravery and his friendly advice concerning the proper management of the gentler sex, the dare-devil Neapolitan was in an incredible state of subjection! He followed the graceful little lady about much

in the fashion of a huge mastiff who is both humble and tame. Peronella was indeed pretty. More, she was quite as wilful as she was pretty. She had but to snap her slim, brown fingers and flash a look at the bewitched Tony to reduce him to a state of unheard of humility, and Kirke wisely concluded that she had led the boasting Italian a mad race, keeping him perhaps in a state of uncertainty by the very means he had professed to use to teach his own value.

The dance ended; the peasants, with the exception of Lauretta who remained behind to perform some household task, trailed off headed by Niccolo triumphantly playing upon his bagpipe to Marietta's huge disgust. With a whimsical flash in her dark eyes, Beatrice, too, disappeared within the villa. When at last she returned, she was clad in a peasant costume, the relic of a schoolday pageant. A red scant skirt revealed a tiny pair of satin slippers and the crimson bodice was of velvet fantastically laced in black. A square white head-dress fell picturesquely about her shoulders.

The face that looked forth from the snowy mantle was full to-day of the exuberance of the girl's southern life. In her hands, she carried an accordion, swaying it gracefully above her head in a long chord of introduction. The next instant, with a burst of rapid music from the accordion, she began one of the old native dances,

deftly manipulating the keys of the instrument and bending easily to its wild music. There was no shade of constraint in her manner. The girl was revealing her southern volatility in a natural surrender to impulse.

Kirke watched her graceful movements in fascination. From the swaying accordion came wild, barbaric bursts of melody and the girl's slender body moved in curvilinear obedience to the rhythmic sounds. She was indeed a daughter of the sun! The sun had crept into her blood, a golden fire of impulse, and she was as free as the peasant, surrendering her body to the spirit of the dance with flashing eyes and dancing feet. It was still another mood in which the girl lived for an instant the life of the body as she so often lived the life of the mind, either mood carrying with it no suggestion of the other. The dance grew wilder and amid a storm of "Bravos!" the girl flung away the white head-dress and seated herself with cheeks aflame and hair ruffled into a dark aureole about her face.

"It is your dance that you love, *padre!*" she panted. Signore Lamberti smilingly nodded.

"But few can dance it so!" he said.

And Kirke, who with the conventionality of the northerner had wondered if the dignified Italian would accord the sudden impulse his approval, saw that the father understood the im-

petuosity of the southern temperament in all its moods.

"These are indeed days of great excitement!" cried the old Signorina, smiling. "Now, Dioneo, we shall have supper in the rose garden!"

Phil glanced at her radiant face.

"She thrives in excitement," he reflected wonderingly, "as a flower in sunshine!"

The table was spread by the giant rose bush. Where the last rays of the afternoon sun filtered through the arbour at the side — the cloth and silver were flecked with a myriad polka dots of fire. Already the grapes had begun to purple and with a quick nod of appreciation — Aunt Emilia smilingly arranged a bowl of violets upon the table that they might repeat the royal tone of colour in the grapes. Lauretta served the supper. Phil, catching a furtive look of sadness in her red-brown eyes, fancied her listless and tired after the wild excitement of the dance.

"Perhaps she's grieving for Pietro!" he decided. "I do wish I could get my hands on him. If I'm not mistaken it would be to his advantage and that of everyone else."

They sat out in the rose-garden until a crescent moon gleamed wanly through the arbour. Seized to-night by one of his moods of enthusiasm, rare indeed of late! — Signore Lamberti spoke proudly of the past and future of his beloved "*Italia adorata.*" It was the hour he

loved best to play, and presently he slipped away to the old piano.

A drunken peasant lurched heavily by, gurgling a vinous chant to Bacchus, and the impassioned melody within the villa stopped abruptly. Ofttimes it took but a single grating instance to turn the channel of Signore Lamberti's mood, and the peasant's song had been a jarring dissonance indeed in the peace and harmony of the rose-scented night.

"Our festa days," observed the old musician quietly as he rejoined his guests in the garden, "would be better, I think, without the great quantities of wine which the peasants drink. It inflames their passions and alas! ofttimes leads to trouble at the end of the day."

His remark was little short of a prophecy.

Late that night Kirke sat out upon the cottage porch smoking when a chorus of excited cries broke out in the valley below in front of the Ciapelletto cottage.

"Marietta," announced Phil, hurriedly climbing the trail, "has just stabbed Niccolo in the arm!"

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Kirke, aghast.

"And now," continued Phil, "she's in a terrible state of remorse. I've just come from there. She's had him carried up to the best bed, although the wound is a mere scratch, and is bandaging his arm and crooning over him like a

sick kid! Manuel says she's carried up all the edibles in the house to his room, besides beating her breast, tearing her hair, and calling upon all the gods to strike her dead for stabbing *'carissimo Niccolo'* in the midst of her 'accursed temper.' She's a perfect little savage! They say below in the valley that this will end their rivalry."

"And the cause of the difficulty?"

Phil was silent.

"Niccolo," he said presently as Kirke repeated his question, "has been drinking too much sour wine with a companion shepherd who returned to Beritola for the feast of San Bertolo to-day after an absence of several months. The visitor grew rather loose-tongued and Niccolo discovered something he had not known before. He sought out Marietta — I believe —" he paused.

"Did you happen to hear the dispute and the taunt that produced the knife?" prompted Kirke insistently.

"Yes!" was the brief reply.

"Well, what was it?"

"Niccolo said," replied Phil slowly, wishing his friend had not been quite so persistent in his interest, "that Pietro had tried to kill Count Teodoro di Gomito the night he fled from Beritola!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE DIAMOND-MAKER

PHIL pushed the Neapolitan *Tribuna* across the breakfast table to his chum and indicated a prominent item with eyebrows elevated in astonishment.

"Read it aloud," he suggested.

Kirke stared incredulously at the heading and obeyed. The item ran as follows:

"Count Teodoro di Gomito of Beritola has just announced to the scientific world that he has discovered beyond question the chemical formula for making diamonds. The Count has been pursuing his investigations along this line for some time and is elated at his success. It is rumoured that the royal authorities, who have been searching for some time for suitable crown jewels, have appointed a commission to be accompanied by a diamond expert, who will visit Count Teodoro, examine the specimens of his work and, if they are deemed satisfactory, leave with him the order for a supply of royal diamonds to be accepted of course only when they have passed the rigid examination of the diamond expert. It is said that the diamonds

made by the scientist are unusually pure and brilliant. Count Teodoro di Gomito is to be complimented upon the importance of his discovery."

"Well?" Phil looked across at his friend. "He has been hinting at this for some time, you recall."

"Yes. Frankly," admitted Kirke, "I thought he was merely a dilettante. There is no doubt, however, that he's made good. This article is quoted verbatim from a conservative scientific journal of high standing."

Phil shrugged oddly and rose from the table.

Kirke lingered over his coffee, his thoughts intent upon the news item of the morning. What would be the effect of Count Teodoro's achievement upon the Lambertis? he wondered. The question roused a train of unpleasant thought and with a sudden frown the American pushed back his chair and left the table. His sketch book lay upon the mantel, and seizing it, he left the villa. In his present mood work upon the picture in his studio was quite impossible. To-day he would sketch in the chapel on the lake shore with its background of forest and distant hill. It would always hold for him a suggestion of the long afternoons, of the dreaming Nereid, the dusk and the music, of the storm, and his own awakening!

Yes, the happiest hours of his life had been spent upon the lake! With this reflection, Kirke sought the cypressed shores in a softened mood. Lazily he paddled his canoe into the shelter of the tree opposite the chapel. The murmur of the water, the rustling of the trees and the bird-calls presently lulled him into a restless slumber filled with dreams of awakening life in his picture, of fire in the eyes and breath in the slender body. The figure stepped toward him from the canvas and the artist saw that he had fashioned a living woman with a glorious light upon her beautiful face, a light of sympathy and understanding.

The sound of voices on the lake shore behind the canoe awakened the dreamer with a start. He sat up staring vaguely about him. Had the voices too been part of the dream? No — they belonged to invisible people who had halted on the other side of the thick wall of foliage fringing the lake. More — they were unmistakable! Kirke realised this with a sudden flush. Beatrice and Count Teodoro! They were standing within a few feet of his canoe quite oblivious of the idler hidden by the trees. The American's first instinct had suggested a rapid retreat. Long before he had released the painter of his boat, however, the trend of the conversation had startled him, and with his mouth set in a grim line, he deliberately settled back and listened.

"Your decision," rumbled Count Teodoro, "has been affected by the presence of the Americans in Beritolo?"

"You are mistaken," Beatrice said quietly. "A year ago, you recall, the answer was the same."

"You came with me willingly enough this morning —"

"*Si!* You said you had news from court about the villa."

"So I have, Signorina — far more important than you dream." Count Teodoro's customary mask of urbanity had slipped from him as he talked. "I would prefer, however, to settle our personal affairs without recourse to that. Become la Contessa di Gomito —"

"Must I repeat my refusal?"

"You are thinking, perhaps, of the private law of the Lamberti race!" suggested Count Teodoro sarcastically, stung by her indifference. "Ah, yes, Dioneo has spoken of it. 'A Lamberti mates only with his or her equal in creative ability, thus insuring a perpetuation of the inheritance!'" His voice as he imitated Signore Lamberti's proud tones grew insolent. "Well, I am fully prepared for that. I have only to offer in return the Neapolitan *Tribuna* of this morning. My dear Signorina, I create diamonds, something more tangible than a song or a poem or even —" he added with an open sneer —"a pic-

ture! Have you no word of congratulation for my scientific discovery? It is unprecedented, I assure you."

"Certainly. I congratulate you!" There was a veiled tinge of mockery in the words which Count Teodoro instantly caught and resented.

"*Grazie,* my pretty iceberg!" he sneered. "I am overwhelmed indeed by the warmth of your congratulation. That veneer of ice, however, it is just for me, is it not so? There is plenty of fire too in those Lamberti veins. The fortunate American, perhaps —"

The suggestion in his words was unmistakable. It instantly dispelled the girl's self-control and Kirke was dumbfounded at her passionate anger. The Lamberti temper had broken its bounds at last and the American, at least, thought none the worse of the girl for her impetuous outbreak. Count Teodoro tried in vain to voice an alarmed apology; he had damaged his cause and knew it, and for the instant Kirke himself was minded to scramble up the bank and take an active hand in the affairs of one Count Teodoro di Gomito. Still there were chivalrous considerations arising out of the nature of the Italian's insolent suggestion that made his interference quite impossible, and with an effort the American remained where he was.

"Just a minute, just a minute!" burst out the Italian angrily as the girl turned to leave.

"*Cara mia,*" he added, with open vulgarity, "you have a most infernal temper. It is a big drawback in a wife. If you will strive to control it long enough, I shall take great pleasure in playing my trump card. About the villa — you force me to turn our pretty little conversation into commercial lines. Perhaps you have heard from your father, Signorina—that there has been an accumulation of taxes on the Lamberti villa for some time?"

"Purely our own affair!" shrugged the girl.

"Not so fast, Signorina! It is very much my affair, too, as you will presently discover. Have the Lambertis noticed that no official documents have been coming from the royal authorities of late demanding payment of the tax? You will remember they were unpleasantly frequent at one time!"

"Of what interest is that to you?"

"Simply this —" Count Teodoro's deep voice boomed triumphantly —"I have paid the enormous tax on the Lamberti villa out of the goodness of my own heart!"

"*You* paid it? You have taken a great deal upon yourself, Count Teodoro."

"And so the little lady is not even grateful?"

"No! I know now that if you have paid the tax you had sufficient foresight to see in the doing some benefit for yourself!"

"Exactly!" came the imperturbable reply,

"you have saved me the trouble of pointing that out. You are very clever, *cara mia* — alas! — still another drawback in a prospective wife. Signorina, the Lambertis are not popular with the royal authorities. A socialistic stain clings to your father. I have but to explain the circumstances, that I paid this accumulated tax upon the villa out of my own pocket (at present they think I acted in behalf of Dioneo), and by the exercise of my influence at court — it is not inconsiderable as I think you know! — the villa will be turned over to me for a trifling consideration. Nominally — it is mine now. Ah! that makes a difference!"

"None!" The girl's voice was still defiant.

"None!" repeated the Italian in astonishment. "You would then allow your father and the old Signorina to be turned out of doors?"

"You would do that?"

"Assuredly."

"I am glad to know it. You fly your true colours, I see, for the first time to-day. I shall write to the government myself, Count Teodoro. I shall explain that you have paid the tax without our knowledge and tell them why you did it!"

"Do so, Signorina. It would be both highly theatrical and spectacular. The result? Just what your father has feared for so many months past. Granting the money tax refunded to me,

the government will confiscate your only shelter for non-payment of taxes unless you can instantly forward sufficient money to pay them. They have done precisely that before with families more in favour, *cara mia,* than yours is at the present time. At court they have no sympathy for the socialist. They call him by a different name, not quite so pretty, and he is regarded as a constant menace. In the end you will fare far worse than you would in my hands. Without the villa —"

He paused, well knowing that the reference was obvious. Save for the old Signorina's small income and the product of the villa estate, the Lambertis were penniless. The effect of this last misfortune upon the high-strung brother and his old sister? Kirke shuddered.

"Has it occurred to you," demanded the Italian brutally, "that this final blow of losing the last of the estate will stifle any belated inspiration your father might have in his music? You remember he has experienced such a setback once before. More, it will kill your aunt. Perhaps," he suggested insolently, "you are counting upon catching the American artist and his gold. Quite right. If he dances, make him play the piper. It is the way of all ladies who trade in beauty. These accursed Americans, however, are ever ready to dance and let somebody else pay the piper! I quite believe, *cara mia,* that you

would not be so unpleasantly independent were it not for the chance of victory you see in the American and his *soldi*. He has the creative ability that the Lambertis demand in their alliances. He is painting a picture to prove it, he —"

But Beatrice had laughed mockingly and darted away.

With a muttered curse, the Italian followed.

Quite unmindful of the consequences, the American scrambled up the bank. At the sound of his approach Count Teodoro wheeled, his handsome face livid; then, having assured himself that Beatrice had disappeared, his hand crept to his pocket. Kirke faced the raging Italian with blazing eyes. There was a tense instant, the blinding flash of steel, and Kirke, with a sudden bound, struck a long knife from Count Teodoro's hand. It hurtled through the air and fell into the bushes beyond.

"You don't even play square in a man's game, do you?" queried the American evenly. White and wrathful, he lunged fiercely toward the Italian and struck him squarely upon the temple with his fist. Count Teodoro swayed dizzily and fell heavily to the ground. With a grunt of unutterable disgust at the ready surrender of his fat body, Kirke seized the Italian's hat from the ground, filled it with water and dashed it angrily in his victim's face to restore him to con-

sciousness. Then he fiercely beat his way through the bushes, flung the Italian's knife into the lake and sought his canoe.

The long hours of the remainder of the day dragged by in interminable procession. Relief at Beatrice's avowed contempt for Count Teodoro, anger at the nobleman's officious payment of the tax, and dread lest the girl, confronted by the necessity of surrendering the villa, should in the end find her resistance unequal to the demand upon it — one by one the American ran the gauntlet of a dozen moods and emerged restless and excited.

For the present, Kirke reflected resentfully, he himself was quite powerless. Count Teodoro's insinuations had been painfully pointed and the girl must not know of his morning's eavesdropping. As for the nobleman's silence, Kirke decided that the ignominious ending of the Italian's attempted treachery would doubtless seal his lips. For a time at least Beatrice would be safe from his vulgar importunities. There would always be the hope in the Italian's mind that the girl, in her cooler moments of judgment, would weigh the consequences of her defiance and reconsider her decision. It would be unpleasant to expose his trump card to the rest of the Lambertis when, by the exercise of a little patience, he might entertain hopes of taking the trick

without! Kirke faced the possibility of Count Teodoro's eventual success with a groan.

Insistently he conned over endless plans to rescue the Lamberti villa from the clutches of its nominal owner. His optimistic conviction of their success, however, was speedily disillusioned by the memory of Count Teodoro's rumoured influence at court. The Italian could checkmate each move of the American if he chose. A direct appeal to the royal authorities would but result, as Count Teodoro had taken pains to indicate, in the refunding of the money and the consequent confiscation of the villa by the government. The amount of the tax was probably not so large as it had seemed to a family whose fortunes had been impaired for years. Count Teodoro, however, had spoken of it as an "accumulated tax," and the Italian drain upon property was notorious. The offer of a loan to people such as the Lambertis was quite impossible.

The hot afternoon dragged slowly by. It was quite the longest afternoon since his arrival in Beritola. The heat was intense; the persistent trilling of the cicadas raucous and loud. Phil's prolonged absence irritated him. To-day he craved the clear-headed philosophy of his chum and it was not forthcoming! . . . Yes, Phil's odd disappearances were daily becoming more inexplicable; more, the culprit's explanations were growing correspondingly ambiguous.

"There's a great deal going on in this valley that I don't pretend to understand," he reflected bitterly, "and Phil, I suspect, is hopelessly entangled in it!"

The American lashed himself into intermittent fits of anger by piling up proofs of Count Teodoro's degeneracy. Even the peasants hated him! What wonder when his avaricious fingers were reaching out in all directions like a hideous octopus, to regain their land and make of the valley a principality as it had been in the days of the old Lambertis. A fitting appanage, indeed, for the illustrious Count Teodoro!

Yes, this last catastrophe would be the climax, indeed, in Signore Lamberti's troubled life. Banished from his castle; deprived of his title by an unjust accusation; pursued by royal disfavour; financially unable to pay the heavy tax upon his only shelter; robbed of his Stradivarius by a cowardly thief; the wonderful old violin with whose aid he had planned to compete for the Milanese prize and clear away the tax that hung, like a sword of Damocles on the frailest of threads, suspended above his head! Verily, Nemesis had persistently hunted him down.

And quite suddenly, in his chaotic resumé of the old musician's misfortunes, Kirke fancied he caught again the gleam of the silver thread. Instantly his fagged brain whirled in a bewildering maze of conjecture. If only Phil would

come and sit in judgment upon the startling suspicion that had slowly filtered through the mental tangle of the afternoon. But at ten that night Phil had not yet returned and Kirke went up to his room, longing to still the clamour of his brain in sleep. He awoke from a restless slumber to find a light burning in his room and Phil bending over him.

"There's your Stradivarius, Kirke!" he exclaimed excitedly, depositing a package on the bed —"and a devil of a time I've had getting it."

Kirke leaped out of bed. With trembling fingers he tore away the protecting newspaper and as he caught the familiar red-gold glint of the old violin that had so altered his life, his face grew very white.

"Who had it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Who had it?" Phil's mouth settled into an unpleasant line, "Count Teodoro di Gomito!"

"I thought so!" said Kirke.

CHAPTER XXII

MR. PHILIP AINSWORTH, DETECTIVE

"AND now, Dr. Watson," said Phil, smiling, "if you'll kindly pass over those cigarettes, I'll enlighten you upon the subject of my first experience in the rôle of Sherlock Holmes.

"Frankly, Kirke, this thing started out in conjecture and wound up in fact. To my mind there was a mystery about the Stradivarius from the instant of its purchase. In the first place, from what you told me of Pietro Masetto and from what Signore Lamberti said of him later, I strongly suspected, as you did yourself, that he was no ordinary thief. You remember he knew nothing of the instrument's peculiar formation, its history or its value, and it seemed to me highly improbable that he would steal an apparently commonplace violin, when he had one of his own, from the man who had won his gratitude and affection, and then go rushing off to America in the dead of night without saying good-bye to anyone. On the other hand, there were Aunt Emilia, Beatrice and Niccolo strongly asserting his guilt, and when it occurred to me that he never would have demanded two hundred dollars for it unless he suspected something

of its value, I confess I was literally on the fence of indecision."

"Then, too," interpolated Kirke, "as we have said before, if he had known its value, he would have demanded more than two hundred dollars!"

"Yes. I confess the thing mystified me completely. To tell you the truth, my mind isn't perfectly clear upon certain parts of the mystery even yet. However, I didn't puzzle much about the Stradivarius until it disappeared from your trunk. Then I became really interested. Evidently someone in the valley of Beritola was interested in Camillo Lamberti's violin as well as ourselves and likewise a trifle unscrupulous about his method of acquiring it.

"There was, of course, the barest chance that Pietro Masetto had returned to Italy with your two hundred, recognised you and regained the violin by another theft. I hadn't the faintest belief in this theory myself, but I determined to investigate it. I interviewed Lauretta and won her sympathy, and she poured out her heart to me. She doesn't know a great deal about it save that the violin and Pietro simultaneously disappeared, and she strongly believes in his innocence. I discovered that she had no idea of his present whereabouts and that she had heard from him but once. The letter bore the post-mark New York, and was, I imagine, the same one she

showed you. She willingly allowed me to read it, and with a feeling that it was for the boy's own good, I justified my curiosity and availed myself of her permission. It merely said that he was 'lonesome and miserable and sick in a far country' and ended with a definite promise of return when he should earn the money.

"Next I made some judicious inquiries among the peasants concerning Pietro's popularity. To my surprise, everyone has a good word for him. All agree that he was a handsome, lovable, good-natured fellow with a wonderful talent, but lazy as the very devil. The latter fact naturally attracted me! Next I climbed the mountain and interviewed Niccolo. I was perfectly frank with him — told him that we'd overheard his squabbles with Marietta and had become interested. He's a true philosopher. He instantly accepted my explanation — the Italian peasant readily comprehends curiosity — and told me as much as he knew. He admitted that his entire knowledge of the subject had been obtained from stray bits of conversation he had overheard at the Lambertis when he was at work in the garden and that he had made use of them to tantalise Marietta who is as loyal to Pietro as Lauretta herself. Of his strange visitor, he knew no more than we had overheard, and he corroborated the general opinion of Pietro.

"Naturally all this set me thinking. As you

can see for yourself, everything I discovered was in Pietro's favour. I decided that the poor devil had been the tool for someone else and that took me back to my first suspicion.

"The instant I realised that the Stradivarius had been stolen from your trunk, my instinct pointed a finger at Count Teodoro; not entirely without reason, either. There were a great many inexplicable things about that gentleman which had already aroused my distrust. In the first place you recall the morning we met him driving home from Naples? I happened to catch a look in his eyes as they rested upon you that made my spine creep. It was a great deal more than jealous anger at your acquaintance with the Lambertis, and it puzzled me. It put me on my guard, and the night we dined at the castle I watched our host pretty closely. Though you may not have noticed it, Kirke, he was acting very peculiarly. When we arrived and he turned away to get the key to the old wing, he smiled a queer little smile of amusement. I caught it and kept my eye upon the gentleman for the rest of the evening. His sudden burst of enthusiasm in the chapel and his voluble appreciation of those statues of the saints struck me as very unnatural. At the time I confess I attributed his manner to the affectation of a man who wishes to appear more appreciative than he is. Since, I have decided that it was

something far more serious. Then later, in his laboratory, there was a curious alertness and excitement about him, and he was as watchful as a cat. It was, too, my good fortune to intercept a peculiar look between Giacomo and his master when dinner was announced, which, in the light of recent events, is somewhat more intelligible. Naturally his odd conduct aroused my interest and distrust, and so that Sunday when we discovered the theft of the Stradivarius, the seed of suspicion fell upon very fertile ground. I proceeded to question Aunt Emilia about the story of Camillo Lamberti's violin. She told me the quaint old story about as Signore Dioneo told you, adding the account of the prize opera as I repeated it to you some time ago. When I told you, however, of Signore Lamberti's plan to pay his tax, I made certain reservations, feeling that the time was not quite ripe for the revelation of my astounding suspicion. I omitted to tell you that with the exception of the immediate family of the Lambertis, Count Teodoro di Gomito was the only person in Beritola who knew of the violin's strange formation, its value, its history, the part it was playing in the writing of the prize opera, and the superstitious blessings which are supposed to accompany its possession; that he took personal charge of the search for the missing instrument and was quite unable to find it. The old Signorina's story made me feel some-

what like a bloodhound when he gets the first scent of his prey. The next discovery I made convinced me that I was on the right track.

"You remember the brass button lost from Giacomo's resplendent butler livery? Riley found it on the porch the night we received the invitation to dine with Count Teodoro. He brought it to us, you recall, after Giacomo had gone, but he didn't happen to explain the strange fact that he had discovered the brass button on the porch of the Villa Spa Gett *before* the Count's butler arrived with the invitation! You see, early in the evening of that day — it was the day we walked home from Naples — Riley, who had taken great exception to the repeated mention of John 'Apworth, chased Gribbins up the mountain, pelting him with tomatoes, and he was clever enough to guess, when he found the button on the porch and later recognised its counterpart on Giacomo's livery, that the butler had been there once in their absence and that, finding the villa deserted, he had been obliged to leave and return later. He knew the strict orders you had repeatedly given about not leaving the house alone, and so both he and Gribbins maintained a discreet silence until one day I tripped him up. I gave him a cross-questioning that he'll remember for a while and he was obliged to confess that the villa had been left alone, not only that night, but one other night as

well, namely, the evening we dined up at the castle with the Count; that, in the early part of that particular evening, Gribbins had heard a peculiar bleating noise in the bushes behind the villa and that both he and Riley had tried in vain to locate it. The sound appeared to recede as they advanced. Whatever it was rustled the bushes and aroused their curiosity to such an extent that it led them all the way up the mountain. When they reached the summit the noise suddenly stopped and the two sped back to the house, considerably alarmed at the length of time they had left it alone. Riley threatened Gribbins with dire punishment if he revealed a word about the brass button or the bleating sound — both proofs of their delinquency. Riley admitted that he never dreamed of any serious results arising out of their disobedience. It is my theory, which I am prepared to verify to a certain extent, that Giacomo was stealing the Stradivarius while we dined with his master.

"I proceeded to make a mental patchwork quilt out of my suspicions and the facts in hand. The result suggested a little investigation of the castle and the Count. You've wondered considerably where I've been spending my evenings. Well, I've been hanging around the castle under the library window and keeping an eye upon our aristocratic Whale. Incidentally it is a deucedly unpleasant place,

chiefly rocks and briers and prickly pears. If you remember, that range of hills, beginning at the Tyrrhenian Sea, extends to a point almost under the library window. Aunt Emilia had told me of a queer recess in the wall of the library where precious documents had been kept by the Lambertis in the old days. I promptly decided that if Count Teodoro had stolen the Stradivarius, it would in all probability be there. Night after night I hung around in the shadow of the mountain boulders outside the window, hoping for an opportunity to climb through into the room beyond and examine the secret hiding place. Our friend, the Whale, however, spent all of his evenings in the castle library, and to my great surprise Giacomo slept there! I had begun to despair of ever getting a look at it, for I couldn't very well burglarise in daylight, when one fine night, as I sat perched behind a huge rock peering cautiously into the room, Count Teodoro suddenly arose, walked over to the other side of the library and touched a spring in the wall. He took your precious Stradivarius out of the secret recess, examined it carefully, snapped open each of the inscribed panels with a frown, and replaced it!

"I was so astounded at the sudden corroboration of my suspicions that I nearly lost my balance. I fled down the mountain and home. Out on the porch I arrived at the following theory of

the method of the violin's disappearance and the cause.

"The morning we met Count Teodoro driving home, you remember, he inquired casually if we contemplated spending the day in Naples. I think now that he had a definite purpose in that question. He wanted to assure himself of our absence from the Villa Spa Gett. That night he sent Giacomo here, ostensibly to deliver the dinner invitation if we were at home, and incidentally, if possible, to slip into the villa and look around if we were still absent. He must have known at the time, Kirke, that you had the violin, but how he discovered it positively is still a mystery. With us in Naples and Riley and Gribbins busy in the kitchen, it would have been very simple to enter the house from the rear. I have often thought how easy it would be to drop from a tree right upon my bedroom window ledge. The Count owning the Villa Spa Gett, Giacomo was probably familiar with the general plan.

"Riley must have been chasing Gribbins up the mountain when Giacomo arrived. The Italian found the villa deserted, the door wide open, and swiftly sped up the stairs. He could very easily drop from the window into the foliage on the mountain if they returned. Of the available places for hiding the Stradivarius, there were only our trunks. One of yours was locked

and that was no doubt exactly what he had expected and prepared for. He came, I think, to take an impression of the lock and succeeded, arriving and leaving unquestioned. When he arrived later with the dinner invitation, Count Teodoro, I am convinced, was already in possession of the impression and had planned to get the violin the night we dined with him. In fact I feel sure that the only reason we were invited to dine in the castle was to get us away from the Villa Spa Gett and clear the track for his thieving deputies.

"In the intervening days he had a key made and when we arrived at the castle, and were safely out of the way, Giacomo and his confederates departed to steal the Stradivarius. The Whale's sense of humour overcame him when he saw us arrive in beatific security, swallowing his bait, and very unwisely he allowed himself the luxury of a slight smile. His burst of enthusiasm in the chapel was to kill time. He realised that he must keep us busy until Giacomo returned to serve the dinner. Consequently he showed off his castle until I grew weary of it. In the laboratory, however, he had begun to grow nervous. The tour of the castle was at an end; there was no excuse for prolonging his exhibition of his scientific paraphernalia; it was time for dinner and still Giacomo had not returned. When the butler finally did appear, I noticed a

look of relief in Count Teodoro's eyes. Giacomo and he exchanged a peculiar glance and the butler announced 'Dinner is served, sir!' in very distinct, deliberate tones. I suspect it was a prearranged signal to announce his success.

"You remember Count Teodoro's insistent questions during the dinner? He was gratifying a primeval instinct and toying with us as a cat plays with a mouse, enjoying, no doubt, my elaborate lies. He knew as well as we did the reason for your arrival in the valley. How is quite another matter.

"Kirke, I am convinced that Count Teodoro was as heavily implicated in the first disappearance of the Stradivarius as he was in the second, and there are a great many reasons for my belief. In the first place, we know that he loves Beatrice Lamberti; second, I strongly suspect that she would never accept him as a suitor unless powerful pressure of an unusual nature was brought to bear upon her. These two facts to my notion supply a partial motive for the theft. Count Teodoro realised that it would take something more than his personal magnetism to win Beatrice Lamberti; he knew, as I have mentioned before, of the prize opera that was to free the villa from the heavy burden of taxation; he knew too that Signore Lamberti's chief source of inspiration was the Stradivarius. So one fine day the violin disappears and with it the musician's

inspiration, his chances for winning the prize and his only hope of freedom from debt; which was, I think, just what this devilish scoundrel wanted. The lure of his castle and his gold would be far more tempting to Beatrice in poverty than in independence. Indeed in the latter state his chances were mighty unstable. The Whale is also, as you know, terribly superstitious. He probably believed those yarns about the luck that is supposed to attend the possession of the Stradivarius and the misfortune that is reputed to come with its loss. By depriving the Lambertis of their family luck (if they ever had any, which I doubt) he doubtless thought he could guard against their future prosperity and incidentally partake of the instrument's good fortune himself. Mind, Kirke, I don't offer this as fact. It is my own explanation of the original theft. Just how he benefited by these facts I — never mind making such excited gestures, old man. You can tell me all you know about it when I finish."

The events of the morning had recurred to Kirke and he felt that he could supply the motive of Count Teodoro's plan to keep Signore Lamberti from paying his tax.

"His plans must certainly have gone astray," resumed Phil thoughtfully. "I don't pretend to understand how or why the Stradivarius and Pietro went to America, but I firmly believe that

the inscribed panels on that violin must have given Count Teodoro some uneasy moments. Your arrival in Beritola, where a strange face is rarely seen, made him apprehensive and suspicious."

Kirke nodded. The nobleman's queer glances had received their explanation.

"Niccolo's strange visitor was, I think, an envoy of the Count's seeking to verify the peasant rumour that Pietro Masetto had fled to the United States. Having proven that fact, he became alarmed. Pietro was in America and you were an American. It might be coincidence and it might not. Lauretta's letter postmarked America, I suspect, suggested to him that you were one of those rich fools quite able to carry out an expensive whim; that you had purchased the violin from Pietro in America and discovered the inscribed panels; that with a quixotic sense of honour which he couldn't possibly understand, you had determined to find Beritola, make inquiries and return the instrument, which was just exactly what had happened. Once he discovered your errand, he did not rest content until he regained the Stradivarius, partly for the sake of the superstitious attributes of the violin, partly because he had no desire to have you return it and win the gratitude of the whole family. His cause was weak enough without having you elevated by such a master stroke as

that! Besides, if, as he so superstitiously believed, luck should actually return to Signore Lamberti with the violin and he were able to ward off poverty and misfortune, his chances of winning Beatrice would disappear entirely.

"To return to my tactics after I discovered the whereabouts of the Stradivarius: I hung around the castle night after night, and once I stayed until daybreak, but the castle library was never alone. I had planned to climb in and recover the Stradivarius in an unpretentious fashion, but the constant vigilance maintained by the Count and Giacomo upset my plans. Each evening they sat there, and after the Count had left, Giacomo slept there! At length, in sheer desperation, I settled upon a plan that has been far more successful than I anticipated." Phil laughed outright. "Do you remember the story Signore Lamberti told at our dinner party of Filistrato Lamberti who was shot down in the library of the castle while playing his flute and that tradition says he can often be heard trying to finish the selection just before some disaster? Well, perhaps you didn't notice that I had introduced the topic without seeming to. I wanted Count Teodoro to hear that story. I had heard it from Aunt Emilia a week or so before. In fact, Kirke, that was the sole purpose of my dinner party.

"Did you happen to notice the effect of that

ghost story upon the Whale? Well, it upset him considerably, as you know, but you didn't know that the night before the dinner just at midnight, the soft, mournful strains of a flute, finishing the *Miserere,* had floated in the library window of the castle where Count Teodoro sat playing cards with his faithful Giacomo. Yes, you've guessed right. It was Philip Ainsworth, Esquire, behind a rock, with prickly pears down his collar, piping away for dear life upon a flute purchased in Naples, where, at an obscure little hotel, he had brushed up one of the very few accomplishments he ever possessed.

"You see I had laid my plans pretty thoroughly. We both knew how superstitious Count Teodoro is, and I knew very well from the confident way in which he spoke that night we dined with him that he had never heard any ghost stories of the castle. Consequently when the old Signorina told me the story of Filistrato Lamberti, I determined to use it to chase Count Teodoro out of his own library. I decided to perform the first instalment of the ruse the night *before* the dinner, and then to casually introduce the subject *during* the dinner. In this way both myself and the Count would apparently hear the story at the same time and he would have no reason to suspect that his nocturnal visitor wasn't a bona-fide ghost.

"That the success of the experiment might be

assured without any suspicion of my identity, I pored over the old books in the Lamberti library until I had a fair idea of the costume of Filistrato Lamberti's time. If by chance the Count or Giacomo should get a glimpse of their ghost he must be in full regalia and offer no suggestion of the twentieth century American who was busying himself in Count Teodoro's affairs. At a second-hand store in Naples, kept, by the way, by one of Tony's innumerable relatives, I found what the dealer assured me was just what I needed. I confess I was a little staggered by the general appearance and I assured him in turn that I aimed to impersonate a gentleman of the last century in this masquerade to which I had been invited, and not a bandit! He had nothing else, however, and it had to do. The rig was certainly melodramatic and antique enough to scare the devil. It consisted of a flowing cloak or cape affair lined with faded red — a black felt hat of approved bandit style decked out in a sweeping feather à la Tony, an eccentric waistcoat, velvet knickerbockers and a pair of high-heeled grand-opera boots. A black wig and pirate moustache completed the outfit. Decked out in this I made as villainous a looking bandit as you would care to see."

Kirke's eyes twinkled at the picture.

"Well," Phil continued, "I've had more fun out of this thing than you can imagine. Every

night in my prickly pear dressing-room behind a boulder I donned the bandit rig and, rolling my own clothes into a bundle, knotted them over my shoulder beneath the cloak where they formed a villainous hump. If there should be any sudden necessity for escape I had no intention of leaving any traces behind me. Regularly at midnight the ghost-flute played under the library window. At first Count Teodoro and his man looked troubled and nervous, but they still continued to spend their evenings there as usual. I resolved to pipe away until doomsday, but I'd chase those two rascals out of the room. Once or twice there were pathetic breaks in the melody for the simple reason that the man behind the flute was obliged to snicker at the horror and fear on their faces.

"Count Teodoro had told Giacomo the story of Filistrato Lamberti and commanded him to go out and thrash around in the bushes for the ghost, but the man was quite as much of a coward as his master. He refused to budge from the library and I remained in undisturbed possession of the rocks and prickly pears. Three nights ago they fled in horror when the first strains of the *Miserere* floated through the window at midnight. They locked up very carefully, however, a fact which bothered me considerably. The next night they left the library around ten. But to-night Count Teodoro seemed

more nervous and upset than usual. He left the castle library about nine with strict orders to Giacomo to lock up thoroughly and join him in another room. Filistrato Lamberti's flute had gotten on his nerves. I could see the man wasn't relishing his job of locking up by himself and I determined upon a bold stroke calculated to scare that dago into fits. I made a few gruesome looking lines upon my face and hands with a wet phosphorus match, and when he came to the windows to lock up, there I stood in the shadows, an approved bandit of a century ago, pale rings of flame playing about my face, just visible enough to be terrifying, and piping Filistrato's *Miserere* for dear life! Well, Kirke, that fellow let out a shriek like a demon and tore out of the library. I promptly climbed in and blew out the lamp. There was just enough pale moonlight to help me find my way and render me the more ghostly if anyone returned. I went to the secret recess, touched the spring as I'd seen Count Teodoro do, got your Stradivarius, changed my clothes a safe distance from the castle, and hurried to the Villa Spa Gett. I left everything just as I had found it, and played a parting strain upon the ghost flute. That's about all of my story. No, don't thank me! It's been a lark. You may prove your gratitude by humouring a little whim of mine. Don't return that violin to Signore Lamberti just yet.

Let me take it up to Naples for you to-morrow and put it in safe deposit."

Kirke's face clouded.

"I was planning to return it to him in the morning!" he said wistfully.

"How were you going to explain your possession of it?"

"That I purchased it from Pietro Masetto in America."

"And what reason would you give for retaining it so long after you had discovered the rightful owner?"

"That it had been stolen again, of course!"

"By Count Teodoro di Gomito? Oh, no, Kirke, the time isn't ripe for that astounding charge. Signore Lamberti would find that too much of a strain upon his credulity. Besides, it isn't fair to Pietro. It would hopelessly convict him of theft in the Lambertis' eyes and, though I don't pretend to understand the details of the story, I'm convinced now that Count Teodoro was the original malefactor in the violin's first disappearance as he was in its second. The drunken shepherd's story has convinced me of that. Did I tell you the details of his experience? I heard them, of course, second-hand during Marietta's violent dispute with Niccolo the night she stabbed him.

"His name is Carlo and he left Beritola the same night that Pietro Masetto fled. He lived

with Niccolo in the mountain hut. That night he started to walk to Naples and on his way down the trail from the summit he heard loud, angry voices near our own villa here. As he came nearer he recognised Pietro and Count Teodoro. He paused to watch them and presently saw Pietro pick up a heavy stone and strike his companion upon the head. The other dropped heavily to the ground and Pietro fled madly down the mountain. Carlo stopped, satisfied himself that the wound was not serious, and went his way. He was fond of Pietro and despised Count Teodoro, so he left without mentioning the occurrence. He did not appear in the valley again until San Bertolo's day when the wine loosened his tongue and he told Niccolo the story. We haven't any very direct evidence to prove that Count Teodoro was the original thief, but you couldn't convince me otherwise!"

"Nor me!" agreed Kirke, and he filled out his chum's story with the events of the morning.

"Ah, that supplies the missing link," exclaimed Phil. "Besides his superstition about the violin's luck, Count Teodoro had the instrument stolen in accordance with his plan to deprive the musician of his inspiration so he couldn't finish the prize opera, thus depriving the family of their sole means to pay off the villa tax. Then he proceeds to pay the tax himself and uses his power over the family to force

the girl to accept him or suffer the consequences. I'm glad you introduced him to an American fist."

"Is there any way we can help them?"

"Wait! In my opinion they are tolerably safe for the present. I *wish* I could have a talk with that fool Pietro. He could clear up one or two points that are more than puzzling at present." Phil rose and laid his hand upon his chum's shoulder. "Kirke," he said abruptly, "something is going to happen in this valley of Beritola and it's going to happen *soon!*"

CHAPTER XXIII

SHADOWS

PHIL took the Stradivarius to Naples the following morning, first locking the case, of which he retained the key, and later placing it in the safe deposit vault with his own hands.

The days that followed seemed unnatural. Shadows had obtruded themselves upon the sunlit valley. Summer bloomed into radiant maturity and August blended imperceptibly into September. Peaches hung in the orchards, pears were ripening in golden clusters, and in the vineyards grapes, royal in size and colour, purpled upon the vines.

Happiness, however, seemed to have fled from the valley. The Lambertis grew quiet and reserved; Beatrice drooped beneath a burden of anxiety, and Kirke, well knowing the cause and helpless to right it, worked fiercely at his picture to still the ache in his heart. As he had expected, Count Teodoro's brutal prophecy that the loss of the villa would stifle Signore Lamberti's inspiration and perhaps kill the old Signorina rang persistently in the girl's ears and alas! rang true. Duty was pointing an inexorable finger at the castle and the Count. Kirke longed to return

the Stradivarius and expose Count Teodoro's infamy, but Phil resolutely opposed the daily suggestion with good-humoured forbearance.

"Go back to your picture, Kirke, and stop fretting!" he advised one morning. "The Lambertis are all safe for another month. Count Teodoro, I believe, appeared at the villa yesterday and made a formal request for Beatrice's hand. The family know the whole story and the alternative if she refuses. Signore Lamberti had a violent outbreak of temper at the Count's dastardly action and the old Signorina heartily endorses him. Beatrice has been given a month in which to make her decision. In the meantime a great many things can happen, and —" he added mentally —"*will!*"

Although the original purpose of his nocturnal exploits had been accomplished in the recovery of the Stradivarius, Phil continued to disappear each night when darkness settled over the valley and his odd conduct became more of a mystery than ever. Once, Kirke entered his chum's room in the early morning to find that Mr. Ainsworth had been absent all night; more to Kirke's further mystification, he returned from Naples in Tony's ramshackle cart, clad in a flashy, ready-made suit and grinning cheerfully at his friend's astonishment. Kirke could have sworn that the culprit had not left Beritola the night before. The fact remained, however. Mr.

Ainsworth had left the villa attired in his usual irreproachable manner; in the morning he had appeared in a plaid suit of atrocious cut, weakly explaining "that he had taken a tremendous shine to it, had cast off his old suit in Naples and in idle surrender to a whim had worn the new one home!" His air proclaimed his secret conviction that Kirke would not believe him and in this he was not mistaken. Mr. Ainsworth's sudden change of taste was too incredible. Besides, though he sought to conceal it, Kirke saw that his wrist had been bandaged — not in a clumsy, amateurish manner, but skilfully enough to have been the work of a surgeon. Inquiry concerning this elicited the brief explanation that the owner of the bandaged wrist "had just tumbled off a rock and got a bit scratched up!" Thoroughly mystified, Kirke asked no further questions. Phil's reticence, however, hurt him. Certainly, he reasoned, the all-night absence, the plaid suit and the bandaged arm were not the result of an uneventful night as his chum had intimated.

Kirke found the month of grace accorded the Lambertis by Count Teodoro a welcome relief after the worry of daily expectation. Yes, as usual Phil was right. A great many things could happen in a month! In a short time now the picture would be finished and despatched to Salvatore for the Paris Exhibition. Then, when

the master's dictum had proven his creative equality —

Ah! yes — it had indeed been a queer tangle! How strangely his own life had been interwoven with the history of an old violin. The instrument that Antonius Stradivarius had made for Camillo Lamberti in the eighteenth century had been the cause of the little drama playing itself out in this rose-vale of Beritola — a drama in which he and Phil had enrolled themselves as actors.

And as the picture approached completion, another interesting item appeared in the Neapolitan *Tribuna.*

"Count Teodoro di Gomito," it read, "who, it will be remembered, recently discovered a method for making diamonds of exceptional purity and brilliancy, has sent, by special messenger, some samples of his work to the King and his diamond expert, who passed most favourably upon the gems. Count Teodoro is now in receipt of an order for the crown jewels. The entire kingdom is amazed at the scientist's unusual discovery."

Kirke pointed out the item to his chum.

"Do you know, Kirke," Phil said slowly as he tossed the paper aside, "I'm inclined to believe that there's a great deal more to Count Teodoro's amazing discovery than most people think!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PICTURE

KIRKE stared critically at his picture. It was done, quite done. The afternoon sunlight, filtering through the window, threw a halo of gold over it and the artist fancied that it was Nature's sanctification of the first product of his awakened ambition. No, his brush had not lost its cunning. The picture more than fulfilled the promise of the old student days with Salvatore.

The canvas before him bore a lake, the waters kissed by the green fire of a southern moon hanging but a slender sickle far above. In the trail of moonlight rocked a canoe, fashioned, one fancied, of the fairy glow that lay across the water from shore to shore. Within it a girl bent lightly to a paddle whose coat of water-silver had flung off a shower of jewel-drops; veritable moonstones of imprisoned mist and moonlight, they seemed, dripping back into the water whence they had leaped at the touch of the silver paddle. The moon-mist mantled the girl's figure in a gauze of silver fire; it floated about her head like a veil, bright against the midnight shadows of her hair; it glorified the face beneath it, a face which seemed indeed the radiant em-

bodiment of the beauty of the night, from which the dark eyes mocked an unseen watcher in the fore-ground. The lake shore was steeped in shadows. At intervals, however, the darkness resolved itself into irregular lines of cypress and ilex pointing heavenward like ghostly fingers of the night. A ridge of mountains lay across the water; their slopes were sheathed in the iris shadows of the night, but the summits had caught the greenish-silver glory of the southern moon and lay bright against a starry sky.

Nocturnia! A host of memories rose and wreathed the picture in an iridescent halo. Yes, this picture before him was indeed a tangible expression of the fire of inspiration in his veins and his love for the girl whose face looked back at him from the canvas. *"Buona notte, Signore Americano!"* Ah! how vividly the words came back!

In accordance with his strict commands, Kirke was quite alone in the Villa Spa Gett. Cook and housekeeper had departed early in the day on a sight-seeing trip to Napoli and Vesuvius with Tony. Tony's eloquence and powers of graphic description, coupled with his expert knowledge of all desirable sights, fitted him peculiarly for the office of tourist guide, as he had gravely assured *Eccellenza* Bentley that morning, and but for that accursed conspiracy he would long ago have made his fortune exhibit-

ing the sights of his native city to generous strangers.

Phil, too, had been absent since the morning. The artist had wished to finish his picture in unbroken quiet, and save for the chirp of the mountain birds and the drowsy hum of the cicadas his wish had been gratified. Now in the waning afternoon his eyes burned and his body ached in the grip of nervous exhaustion. With a sigh of relief he flung himself down upon the studio couch and slept the sleep of utter weariness.

When he awoke, the room was cool and dark. A breeze redolent with the odour of pine blew down from the mountain and rustled the window curtain beside him. Lazily the American arose and stared out into the cool darkness that shrouded tree and mountain. It was all so wonderfully peaceful after the nerve strain of the day. High above on the mountain ridge a light twinkled brightly in Niccolo's eyrie hut and the plaintive sounds of the bagpipe floated weirdly through the pines.

Caught by the sound of a stealthy rustling, Kirke carelessly looked down at the bushes beneath his window. A peasant stood below, staring intently, it seemed, at the Villa Spa Gett. The moon, serenely sailing out from a cloud, suddenly illumined his face and Kirke drew back in shadow, his heart bounding in intense ex-

citement. It was Pietro Masetto! The lad's face was thinner, his eyes more anxious and melancholy, but there was no mistake. The ragged Italian who had sold him the Stradivarius stood below, unconscious of the silent watcher at the window.

Pietro Masetto! He alone could clear up the mystery of the Stradivarius. With a bound Kirke descended the stairs — caution forgotten in an absorbing desire, but Pietro, catching the sound of the running footsteps, turned and fled.

"Pietro!" called the American softly, belated caution warning him that the boy's visit was doubtless secret, but the Italian ran on up the mountainside, climbing with the agility of a frightened deer. Eagerly the American followed. Why was the fool running away when it was to his advantage to wait? he wondered in an unreasoning burst of anger. The question speedily answered itself. Pietro's complicity in the disappearance of the Stradivarius and his attack upon Count Teodoro made an open visit to Beritola quite impossible. Moreover, he did not know the identity of his pursuer.

On and on they went, stumbling and scrambling through the underbrush. A huge boulder loomed up in the American's path and a burly figure, oddly muffled, stepped suddenly from the shadows and barred his progress. Still intent

upon the fleeing Pietro, Kirke brushed roughly by. As he did so a heavy club descended upon his head and the American slid down upon the mountainside in a senseless heap.

Back at the Villa Spa Gett the Americans' goat, presented to them in a burst of generosity by Marietta who had frankly refused to give the animal a character endorsement, had been roused by the mysterious procession of figures flitting about the silent house. The chase had been mildly interesting. Later, however, when a slight figure had made a fleeting visit to the deserted house and disappeared, and a second visitor had arrived, strangely cautious, the goat's excitement grew. With a wild tug he strained at his rope and loosened it, colliding in his mad bolt for freedom with the cautious figure descending the villa steps. The mysterious visitor fell with a grunt, striking his head heavily against the sharp corner of the bottom step, and lay motionless.

The night breeze presently revived the American lying upon the mountainside. He sat up, mechanically touching a deep cut upon his forehead. A stream of blood trickled slowly down his face, and he stared vaguely about him, finding the dark outlines of rock and bush indistinct and unfamiliar. Where was he? he wondered dully. Why did his head throb so? As he staggered weakly to his feet the events of the

evening flashed over him in a series of mental pictures, curiously evanescent. The fleeing Pietro, the burly figure in the path, the jagged rock upon which he had fallen — yes, yes, it was all quite clear! An icy dread permeated his body, and reeling unsteadily down the mountain path, he hurried back to the villa.

In the terrible premonition that obsessed his mind, he failed to notice the motionless figure beside the porch. The stairway seemed never-ending; the door of the studio oddly distant. On the threshold he struck a match with shaking fingers and as its light faintly illumined the studio, he leaned heavily against the doorway with a groan. His foreboding was justified. The picture was gone!

The canvas had been cut from the frame with his own palette knife lying perilously near. The match in his hand burned his fingers and he dropped it, standing numbly in the darkness. The persistent throb of the wound grew more intense. Through his head flashed the words, "Phil, Riley's bell! Phil, Riley's bell!" over and over again. Yes, he must summon Phil. Blindly he obeyed the suggestion, staggering weakly down the stairway to the kitchen. A great whirring sounded in his ears; shadowy forms danced grotesquely before him, but in spite of all he fumbled along the wall until he found the hook and the bell-rope that went up over the

rafters. The next instant Riley's great dinner bell clanged out raucously over the quiet valley and Kirke fell heavily to the kitchen floor, an ugly stream flowing from the cut on his forehead.

CHAPTER XXV

BEATRICE

PHIL, lazily wandering homeward from one of his nocturnal exploits, halted abruptly at the clang of Riley's bell and frowned in mystification. Had the Irishman returned? No, the tourists were not expected until later. Kirke then was still alone in the mountain cottage and some occurrence of an unusual nature had prompted him to ring the bell. For what? Assistance? At the thought, Phil bounded up the trail in alarm. The prostrate figure at the side of the porch caught his eye and, genuinely startled, he paused beside it and struck a match. The light fell upon the ghastly face of Count Teodoro di Gomito. In growing apprehension he entered the kitchen and lit the lamp.

Kirke lay upon the floor in what seemed to his chum's agonised eyes a pool of blood. Riley's huge bell had fallen to the floor. Phil bent over his friend with a sigh of relief. The cut in his forehead was ugly and jagged to be sure, but not deep. With gentle hands he washed the dirt away and bandaged the wounded forehead with his handkerchief; then he sought Riley's brandy flask in the kitchen closet and forced it between

his chum's teeth. Kirke sat up, weak and faint, to find Phil bending over him, his face strangely white and compassionate.

"It's all right, Kirke!" said a quiet voice. "You'll be stronger now in a second or so." But with returning consciousness, Kirke's eyes had grown oddly wild and startled.

"You don't understand!" he said unsteadily. "The picture! The picture is gone!"

"Gone!" Phil echoed the words blankly. "H'm," he added grimly, "our worthy landlord again, eh!"—and with an ominous squaring of chin and shoulders he left the kitchen and descended the veranda steps. Count Teodoro, however, had disappeared. With returning consciousness it seemed he had slipped stealthily away. Phil shrugged.

"Ah, well," he reflected, frowning, "his reckoning is inevitable anyway! Now, Kirke," as he hurried back to the kitchen, "if you're able, I'd like to hear exactly what's happened."

Quite coherently, for with the cessation of the flow from his forehead had come increasing strength, Kirke recounted the events of the evening, the glimpse of Pietro Masetto, the chase up the mountain, the cloaked figure, and the discovery of the empty frame. Long before he had finished, however, there came a sharp rapping at the villa door and Lauretta appeared, her long, red-brown eyes ablaze with excitement.

"Signore Ainsworth," she began, but Phil with a warning gesture stepped out upon the porch and closed the door. An instinctive prescience had warned him of the trend of Lauretta's message.

"Kirke," he said kindly, when he re-appeared —"there are unexpected complications at the Lamberti villa and they want you. If you are able, I think you'd better go back with Lauretta."

It was a dizzy walk through the valley, a walk of which Kirke afterward retained but the dimmest of memories. Still he was vividly conscious of a blur of incidents: of Signore Lamberti's kindly hand upon his shoulder at the villa door; of a room old-fashioned and dimly familiar in which the old Italian warmly insisted upon helping him to a chair and then went quietly away; of Beatrice bending compassionately over him with a glass of brandy in her hand, urging him to drink in a voice that sent the blood surging wildly through his veins.

Still, somehow, it was a new Beatrice, he fancied, that bent over him to-night. Not the mocking Nereid nor the Goddess of the Storm; not the capricious hostess of the festa dance nor yet the moon-clad nymph of the chapel lake. From the sable mist of her hair to the eyes and cheeks blazing so strangely, this girl seemed a beautiful tigress alive with a passionate anger.

Mechanically Kirke drank the brandy and shrugged impatiently, annoyed at his own weakness; but meeting Beatrice's eyes, he bravely essayed a smile of reassurance and felt that it was strangely twisted and unsuccessful. A wave of colour swept hotly over the girl's face and the anger in her dark eyes gave way to a wonderful softness, a tearful softness, it seemed, of mingled fire and velvet.

"Ah!" she cried, unconsciously touching the bandage upon his forehead with a gentle hand, "you are hurt. I did not know when I sent Lauretta." Her face grew very white. "Oh!" she went on passionately, anger leaping up again in her eyes, "I — I did not think he would dare — I — I did not think it would end so for you!"

"It — it is nothing!" stammered Kirke, but even as he spoke he lay back, a little white and shaken, and closed his eyes, for the touch of the girl's hand upon his forehead had set his pulse to bounding violently and the throb of the wound was growing painfully intense. Hazily he was conscious that Beatrice had noiselessly slipped away and returned, that she was bending over him again a little frightened and with a powerful effort he opened his eyes, opened them to find himself staring blankly at his picture of Nocturnia held up before him by the trembling fingers of Nocturnia herself.

There was an odd radiance in Beatrice's eyes.

"Ah, yes," she said, "in spite of all, Count Teodoro was too late!"

Kirke stared mutely at the canvas, but his eyes were eloquent. He felt oddly dazed by the inconsequent rush of events, by the impetuous story pouring excitedly now from Beatrice's lips, and, at first, by his own inability to follow her. Bit by bit it all became clear: Lauretta's chat in the castle kitchen with Therese; Count Teodoro's careless conference with Giacomo that the girl had overheard and her startled flight to Beatrice. With Giacomo on the mountainside alert for complications, Count Teodoro's plan to enter the mountain cottage, attack the solitary artist and cut away his picture, upon this triumphal day of achievement, had constituted a picturesque vendetta highly attractive to the Italian's theatric taste.

"I — I really went to warn you," finished the girl uncertainly, but again as she met the American's eyes, the hot colour swept over her face and she turned away. "But the cottage was empty and dark, and I thought, of course, I had come too late. When I found that the picture was still in the studio, I cut the canvas with your palette knife. I — I could not carry the frame."

Kirke rose unsteadily, all his proud plans of waiting for Salvatore's endorsement of his creative equality lost in a sweep of emotion.

"Beatrice!" he began, but the girl shrank back with a gesture of warning.

"Don't," she pleaded wildly, "don't *thank* me!" but the strain of the past weeks culminating in these climacteric events of the evening had been too much for her self-control. There was a swift glimmer of tears on the long, dark lashes, and with a mute glance at the American's white face and bandaged forehead, she hurried from the room.

Again the queer daze from the throbbing wound veiled the room in a dancing cobweb, but this time the face that glimmered dimly through it was the face of the old Signorina who bent over him with the caressing touch of the eternal mother in her fragile hands.

"My boy," she said with gentle dignity, "it has been a very hard evening for us all. Signore Philip has come for you. He was a little worried."

And Kirke, looking up into the tranquil depths of the eyes that met his, felt with a sudden shock that there was at least one of the inmates of the villa who had divined the tumult of his heart.

"I've been up to Niccolo's hut," explained Phil as they climbed the trail to the cottage, and, as Kirke interrupted with a question, "yes, Lauretta told me the whole story. I thought perhaps Niccolo might have caught a glimpse of

Pietro, but there's no trace of him anywhere on the mountain. At first, before Lauretta arrived, I was inclined to think that Pietro had been a decoy to lead you up the mountain away from home. Now I'm convinced that when you came crashing up the mountainside after Pietro, Giacomo thought you were pursuing Count Teodoro and dealt with you accordingly. By the way," he added with a grin, " the tourists have returned. Seems that Tony drove so madly over the hills coming back that the bottom of the cart fell out and Gribbins disappeared from view with a dull thud. He's very sore! "

Long into the night, the Americans discussed the exciting events of the evening. At intervals, too, there were muffled disputes in the downstairs bedroom of the cook and housekeeper. The Englishman could neither forget nor forgive his sudden descent into the prickly pears of the mountainside. More, he continued to blame Riley and Tony impartially as he rubbed his damaged spine with a weird concoction of vinegar and salt. That the cut-throat Tony had planned his sudden demise and deliberately kicked the bottom out of his ramshackle cart with unscrupulous designs upon the valued watch-chain of shillings he firmly believed, nor did he hesitate to express his sentiments to that effect as he rose periodically in the night to bathe his spine, until the Irishman with

a heated objection to the odour of the home-made liniment, unhesitatingly threw it out of the window. With excessive dignity the valet returned to bed, and unbroken peace settled for the first time that eventful evening over the little mountain cottage among the pines.

CHAPTER XXVI

NOTES

THE picture was shipped to Salvatore in the morning. That same afternoon, Beritola was aroused from its wonted tranquillity by a new sensation. Since the advent of the Panhard with its sudden explosion nothing had been greeted with so much interest and awe. A magnificent coach appeared at the summit of the hillroad from Naples and rolled grandly down into the valley. It was an imposing equipage likely to inspire terror and respect wherever it went, and the peasants flocked wide-eyed from their houses to view it. The coachman and footmen were resplendent in scarlet jackets and yellow breeches, their post-boots reflecting the sun like polished mirrors. The coachman urged his prancing horses through the crowd and struck an attitude, as he drew up before the castle door, that the admiring peasants never forgot. Phil Ainsworth, a member of the crowd, rightly guessed its mission. The Royal Commission and a diamond expert had arrived to inspect Count Teodoro's diamonds.

The equipage left as it had arrived, in a blaze of glory, the coachman snapping his whip at the

gaping youngsters with amused tolerance. He was a very great man, this scarlet-coated coachman, and these simple peasants amused him. The Neapolitan *Tribuna* recounted the visit of the Diamond Commission in the following manner:

"The Commissioners appointed by the Royal Authorities to inspect the diamonds made for the Crown by Count Teodoro di Gomito were the guests of the eminent scientist at his castle in Beritola yesterday. The envoys of the King were courteously permitted to inspect the laboratory (the Count's private sanctum) as well as the crown jewels which are practically finished. The Commissioners, whose real object in visiting Count Teodoro yesterday was an inspection of the diamonds, expressed themselves as satisfied and delighted with the nobleman's work. Signore Pamfilo Mazzoni, the expert, declares that the diamonds outrival the natural product in purity and brilliance. In two weeks' time, during which the Count will make the largest of the stones ordered, thereby completing his work, the Commission will revisit the scientist, accompanied by a detachment of soldiery under whose protection the diamonds will be carried to the King. The number of jewels ordered is said to be very extensive."

The week that followed this announcement in the Italian press was full of puzzling occur-

rences to Signore Lamberti. One morning upon opening the front door of the villa he discovered beneath it a slip of paper which had evidently been left there during the night. It was couched in careful Italian and bore these words:

Do *you* think it is possible to make diamonds?

The old musician regarded the mysterious slip of paper in great astonishment. The strange question recurred to him many times during the day but he finally dismissed it, convinced that the bit of paper had been the wind-tossed fragment of a letter. The even edges of the paper and the absence of any other writing, however, suggested otherwise, and when, on the following morning, he found another slip of paper lying in the hall he suspected that the communications were meant for him and wondered greatly. The second strip of writing was the duplicate of the first in size and shape:

You know the formation of the castle! Think it over.

The old Italian obeyed the concluding command without arriving at any definite explanation of the mystery. The writing upon each of the strips was uniformly regular and hinted nothing of the hand that had penned it. The next note bore his name and removed all doubt from his mind that he was the intended recip-

ient of the mysterious communications. The contents were mystifying and suggestive:

Diamonds of scientific composition and secret passages. What do they suggest to Signore Dioneo Lamberti?

The question made him very uncomfortable. He searched the bit of paper for some clue to the identity of the writer, compared it with the other and in considerable excitement awaited the next one. The mysterious messages had become the opening event of each morning and invariably lay just inside the door, each one a little more comprehensive than the predecessor. He arose early and sought the hallway. The bit of paper lay there as he had expected. It bore the following pointed query:

Does Count Teodoro di Gomito impress you as an honest man or a scientist?

The old Italian reddened slightly at the significant question. Several times that night he crept down stairs in the hope of intercepting the unknown messenger. Quite in vain. The hallway remained free from ghostly bits of paper and he returned to bed thoroughly mystified. In spite of his vigilance the nocturnal visitor had eluded him. In the morning the slip of paper lay inside the door and its meaning was self-evident:

A secret passage ending on the shores of a sea; an un-

scrupulous man living in the castle from whose library the passage leads; a sudden discovery of the way to make diamonds; what is the logical conclusion?

The inference was so very obvious that the old musician flushed hotly at the insinuation and dropped the paper, turning over the possibilities in this combination of facts with pained surprise. Thus the sixth:

The royal authorities would be grateful for the suggestion that they secretly investigate this passage before they purchase the crown diamonds. Smuggling is a serious offence. The author of this note knows positively that the source of the diamonds in question is *not* a combination of chemical substances.

The last of the series of notes was brief and to the point:

It is *your duty* to inform the authorities immediately!

The truth of the mysterious command impressed the Italian strongly. It was obviously someone's duty to warn the government of the fraud, but why, he asked himself in great perplexity, had not the author of the notes followed his own advice? In a helpless quandary he consulted Kirke, carefully arranging the notes upon the table in the order in which they had arrived. The American read the series in astonishment.

"Is there such a passage?" he asked finally.

"Yes," nodded the Italian thoughtfully, "there is. I had almost forgotten its existence. There is an underground passage tunnelled from the castle through the hills for some distance where it joins a series of natural caverns, and one can go from a door in the panelling of the library of the castle straight out to the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea. It was built by an ancestor of mine who discovered the series of caverns from the sea entrance quite by chance and tunnelled the rest of the way to the castle. It was never used in my own time."

"In that case," advised Kirke gravely, "it seems to me that it *is* your duty to inform the authorities at once. The unknown author of these notes has presented a perfectly logical case. It would, as he suggests, be a very simple matter to smuggle diamonds to the castle through the passage. But I fail to see why he has not warned the government himself. Evidently he intends to leave that matter to you. May I have these notes for a day or so? I should like to look them over a little more closely."

Signore Lamberti absently assented and Kirke left him seated in an arm-chair in deep preoccupation, puzzling his brain for the precise phrases in which to reveal the situation without conferring the entire credit upon himself. The unknown author of the notes, he told himself, was the government's real benefactor.

After several hours of careful thought and many unsatisfactory experiments, the following communication was dispatched to the royal authorities in a personal letter to Benedetto Abbato, requesting his cousin to deliver the enclosed notification, if possible, to those who were not friendly to Count Teodoro.

The written warning was as follows:

It has been suggested to me that I inform you of the peculiar structure of the castle in which Count Teodoro di Gomito now lives. There is a secret passage leading from the castle's library, tunnelled through a range of hills to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Midway between Beritola and the sea this passage, built in the old, exciting days before we had the blessing of a United Italy, joins a series of natural caves, thereby rendering possible an underground journey of about a mile from the castle to the sea.

If a secret watch were kept upon the shore entrance to this passage, the writer thinks it would reveal the source of the Count's diamonds which could easily be smuggled in at that wild point of the coast and brought to the castle in secrecy."

DIONEO LAMBERTI.

Beritola, Italia.

Several times the old Italian decided to destroy the letter and ignore the unknown benefactor's suggestion entirely. Suppose it should prove to be an unfriendly ruse to strain further his relations with the government? If the information conveyed in the series of notes proved untrue, that would of course be the inevitable result. Did the letter sound like a jealous accusation of the man in whose ancestral domain

the accused smuggler dwelt? That was scarcely possible, he told himself deprecatingly, when there was no such feeling in the heart of the writer. After anxiously weighing each point in his contemplated action, he returned to his original decision and sent the letter.

So Count Teodoro was the rascal Emilia had always declared him to be! It was incredible! . . . Yet the scientist's aid when the Stradivarius was stolen had been invaluable, and Signore Lamberti, in the secret tribunal of his soul where he frequently arraigned himself, had been a little horrified to find that it had not mitigated a certain quiet dislike of his neighbour which he had tried in vain to conquer. . . . Yes, he had been deeply sensible of the nobleman's generosity in those first, dark hours after the Stradivarius had disappeared. Had not Count Teodoro hired a host of detectives to search every peasant's house without explanation or permission (a proceeding secretly disapproved by the inmates of the villa) and firmly announced that their remuneration would come from him alone? . . . To be sure it had been a little galling, this enforced acceptance of another's pecuniary aid, but Signore Lamberti had quietly and gracefully accepted the inevitable and stubbornly fought against an instinctive aversion which had in the end received an unexpected impetus in the Count's officious payment of the villa's tax.

"Yes, he has always coveted enormous wealth," mused Signore Lamberti, "that by his tempting offers he might buy back every peasant's home and make of this valley a principality once more with Count Teodoro as the ruler."

And with his hands clasped thoughtfully behind his white head, the Italian fell to thinking of the old days when he, too, had lived in the castle. How he had planned his life and a musical career, he thought with a faint smile, and how differently his repeated misfortunes had ordered it! What would eventually happen to the old villa, the last possession of the Lambertis? What would be the outcome of the royal investigation of the secret passage? The two questions were presently replaced by an absorbing third. *Who* was the author of those mystifying notes?

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SECRET PASSAGE

KIRKE seated himself at the luncheon table with a peculiar gleam in his eyes and pushed a small bundle of papers across the table to his chum.

"Look them over!" he said briefly.

Phil obeyed in apparent mystification.

"What's it all about?" he demanded, looking up.

Kirke looked squarely into his friend's eyes.

"I think you know," he suggested bluntly. "I don't pretend to understand your monkey-shines of late," he went on. "You stay out all night and come back from Naples in the morning with Tony when I could have sworn that you hadn't left the valley, wearing a giddy plaid suit, to say nothing of having your wrist carefully bandaged."

"I think I explained all that, to my own satisfaction!" interpolated Phil.

"Well, it wasn't entirely to mine!" Kirke paused. "See here, Phil," he added suddenly, "you wrote those notes to Signore Lamberti. I have the proof here at hand rescued from the scrap basket!" He pushed a crumpled slip of

paper across the table until it lay beside the others. The writing was identical.

Phil shrugged.

"H'm!" he sniffed sarcastically, "you're something of a detective yourself, I see. Well, if you must know it, I did write those notes and I have every reason for wanting my identity kept secret as you'll presently see. I had planned to tell you a little later.

"In the first place, if you must have the whole story now, although I told you all the details concerning the recovery of your Stradivarius, I made certain reservations. For one thing, one night as I lay watching the castle library, Count Teodoro to my great surprise, suddenly stepped out of the panelling along the side wall. Another time, Giacomo disappeared in the same mysterious fashion, and I grew interested. It was rather a novel experience in my life to see substantial individuals step through solid walls!

"When we first read of Count Teodoro's scientific discovery, however, I confess it did not occur to me that it might have any connection with the sliding panel in the library wall, but the night after I regained possession of the Stradivarius, I went up to the castle again chiefly because I was very curious about the mysterious exit. I had determined to investigate it if the chance were forthcoming. That the ghost music might not stop too soon after the disappearance

of the Stradivarius from the secret recess, I took along my flute and the bandit rig and carried out the program of the other evenings. Beside, I'll admit, I took a malicious delight in scaring those two cowards.

"If you'll remember, Kirke, that item in the *Tribuna* concerning the Count's manufactured diamonds had appeared just the day before. Well, as I settled myself beneath the library window with the flute in readiness, Count Teodoro stepped forth from the wall, spread out a collection of something upon the table and remarked, 'An unusually fine assortment, Giacomo! These will do for His Royal Highness.' I craned my neck from behind the rock to see the fine assortment but was unsuccessful. It whetted my desire, however, to investigate the sliding panel.

"That night Giacomo and the Count were incredibly nervous. The butler had described the phosphorescent bandit under the window, and at the slightest noise they both started violently and stared at each other. At midnight I played the *Miserere* again from behind the rock and the cowards fled instantly as they had the night before, leaving the library windows unlocked. I climbed in without loss of time, still evoking strains from the haunted flute. But try as I might, I could not find the panel spring and was obliged to climb out again.

"For several nights I revisited the rocks outside the window in the hope that either Giacomo or the Count would press the panel spring from the library side and enable me to conjecture its exact whereabouts. I purposely omitted the ghost flute; and presently, as the two regained their courage, they took to spending their evenings again in the library. I heard some immensely interesting conversation. For one thing, I overheard Count Teodoro's opinion of the two Americans in general and the artist in particular. He suspected you from the very start. The rarity of visitors in Beritola, the inscribed panels on the violin and Pietro's flight had made him nervous and apprehensive. Niccolo's mysterious visitor was one of his men, and when to the fact that you were an American, he added the fact of Pietro's letter, his suspicion grew. His first real knowledge of our plans, however, came that first night we met him at the Lambertis'. He followed us home, and hidden in the pines by the cottage porch heard our whole conversation. He is especially vindictive about that blow you gave him along the lake shore. He asserts that in spite of Beatrice's refusal, he can in the end force her to marry him. I also became conversant with the details of his great ambition. The man seems fairly obsessed by a desire to buy up all the land in Beritola and make one estate of it.

"It soon became evident to me that if the Count and Giacomo were making any trips through the library wall, it must be during the day. I determined not to wait any longer. I would climb in and examine the wall again without further delay. There was always the hope that I might stumble upon the spring and in a general way I already knew its location. So one fine night I took up my solitary vigil behind the shelf of rock with your revolver and the ghost-flute, and around ten o'clock the mournful strains of Filistrato Lamberti's flute floated once more through the library window.

"The two men sprang to their feet, their faces like chalk.

"'My God, Giacomo,' exclaimed the Count, trembling violently, 'there it is again and they say it always foretells disaster!'

"And in fear and horror the two scoundrels stumbled out of the library. I played at intervals of a minute or so to keep them scared and then scrambled in through the window. I had my revolver in readiness in case they returned. Keeping an eye upon the door through which they had fled, I felt along the wall where I knew the spring to be. This time I found it. It was in the centre of a carved indentation in the panelling. I pressed it firmly and a door silently opened away from me, revealing a flight of stairs. It wasn't a sliding panel as I had suspected, but

a hinged door quite invisible from the library. The fact that it opened away from the room had misled me. After convincing myself that there was a spring on the other side of the wall to let me out again and that I quite understood the mechanism, I softly closed the door and descended the stairs."

"Suppose," suggested Kirke, "that you had found the Count and Giacomo in the library upon your return."

"In that case I was prepared to give them another selection upon the ghost flute from behind the panel with perhaps a sepulchral groan or two thrown in for luck. Besides, a sudden glimpse of my raven locks and pirate moustache, to say nothing of the villainous hump and the cloak, would have scared them to death.

"I struck a match and descended a flight of steps that seemed interminable. Presently I found myself in a tunnel at the entrance of which I discovered an abundant supply of lanterns and matches. With gratitude in my heart for the Count's thoughtful preparations for a sightseer such as myself, I appropriated a lantern and plenty of matches, lit the lantern, turned it down until it gave but a dim light, and walked, well, I was astounded at the length of the thing! I walked and walked and suddenly the tunnel changed in structure. Up to this time it had been a very carefully constructed

passage — the work of human hands — but now it became a series of natural caverns strung out one after the other in irregular procession. I went on and on, and presently I heard voices ahead of me. I blew out the lantern and crept on, feeling my way as best I could. I turned abruptly from one cavern into another and almost ran into a bunch of the worst looking rascals I had ever seen in my life. They were sitting around a fire cooking something with an abominable odour and smoking and drinking. The firelight may have distorted their faces and given me a bad impression, but I must confess they gave me a start. By the light of the fire, I could see they were all dark-skinned and dirty and heavily armed. I drew back noiselessly in the shadow and was just about to retrace my foolhardy footsteps when one of the men growled:

"'Count Teodoro expects us to have that big diamond here to-night, Giuseppe; what will you tell him?'

"'The truth,' rumbled the man Giuseppe, in a deep, bass voice. 'He knows smuggling is no child's play. There's a revenue cutter prowling around the coast,' he paused, apparently listening, and back of me I heard approaching footsteps. Well, Kirke, it seemed to me that I had a berth on the Celestial Express! It was Giacomo and the Count coming for the big dia-

mond! It flashed over me then why Giacomo had slept in the library before I scared him away. He had been guarding the secret door. I also understood Count Teodoro's peculiar intimacy with his butler. He was really one of the smugglers. In that brief space of time, I came to understand a great many things. The uneasiness of the scientist when I remarked the newness of his laboratory equipment was not so puzzling. The laboratory was a bluff to lend colour to the lie that he had discovered the way to make diamonds. His scientific researches, too, were careful preparation for what was to follow.

"Well, it was a choice of that band of scoundrels or the Count and Giacomo. It looked pretty bad for me either way and at the time I had no hope of getting out of there alive. Nevertheless I rapidly reviewed my chances for escape and they were mighty few. I could hear the footsteps behind me approaching nearer and nearer. Serene and confident, they were not attempting to deaden the sound of their footsteps as I had done mine. The contact of their heels with the passage floor rang through the caverns apparently close at hand, but I suspected that they were really some distance away. I certainly had no intention of standing still and placidly awaiting capture and the exposure of my ghost fraud; the Count, with his lantern,

would have to pass me to join his men, and he couldn't fail to see me — and if I went ahead, there was that ugly band of cut-throats.

"A crazy idea shot through my head and I immediately put it into execution. I was planning to startle that gang of scoundrels into momentary inactivity and I did. I ruffled my long black wig into wild disorder and smudged my face with lantern black. The latter obliterated the last trace of my American origin. The next instant that bunch of ruffians was treated to the unexpected sight of a demented bandit of the last century, clad in antique flowing cape and velvet breeches, with a dirty, blackened face, a long, tousled mane and a hump on his back who dashed wildly through their midst yelling like a Comanche Indian in a war dance. For one fleeting instant I saw their thunderstruck faces, and desperate as I was, I had to grin. Then the one they called Giuseppe fired and hit me in the wrist."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kirke, "I thought you tumbled off a rock!"

"I did. You'll hear of that later. I went on through that series of caves, finding my way in the dark as best I could and bumping into walls every other second, the gang after me. That brief thunderstruck moment, however, had given me the advantage. By the time they had recovered their senses and leaped to their feet, I

was some yards ahead. I had no idea where I was going and cared little, providing it meant eventual escape. You remember I was always a pretty good runner. I kept well ahead, coming at length into a cave that apparently had no outlet. I decided that the game was up for sure this time! I ran around the cave, touching the rocky wall with my hands. It was all perfectly solid with no hint whatever of an aperture. As I examined one rock, however, it suddenly gave as if it were being rolled back from the other side and the next instant I felt a rush of cool night air coming from down near the floor. I dropped upon my hands and knees and collided violently with a man crawling through from the other side. I seized his arms, dragged him through pretty forcibly and gave him a jolt in the stomach that sent him down with a grunt. Then I gratefully followed his example of crawling through the aperture. I heard the gang fill the cave back of me yelling and swearing, but I went flying on, thankful for the fact that I was once more in the open. There had been a little shower and it was cloudy and dark; so dark, indeed, that I couldn't see an inch before me. In my race for safety I tore straight off a rock into the atmosphere and landed with a splash into several feet of water. Well, Kirke"— Phil threw back his head and shouted with laughter —"you remember I had

my own clothes knotted around my neck under the bandit cloak? The strain of crawling through the rocky aperture and the sudden contact with the water was too much for them. I felt a knot slip and when in a panic I grabbed for the precious bundle, it was gone! The waves had swallowed up my last tie to modern civilisation! To regain it was impossible; besides, it was dangerous to loiter near the entrance to the passage, so I swam toward the glow of Vesuvius. I was in the Tyrrhenian Sea, although I did not know it until later. I swam until my strength gave out. The wound on my wrist was insignificant, but it pained considerably, and so I was obliged to land. I sat on the beach for some time trying to decide what under the canopy I was going to do. My predicament was unique to say the least. I was stranded in the most melodramatic of bandit rigs and likely to be taken up as a suspicious character if I showed myself. Still, my wrist was in bad shape and I was pretty weak, certainly too weak to walk back to Beritola. The more I thought of my general appearance, the more panic-stricken I became. With or without the bandit cloak, I was quite hopeless, and the various events of the evening culminating in my enforced sea-bath had certainly done nothing to improve an already villainous outfit. Finally in sheer desperation I stalked forth to hunt somebody who would

shelter me for the night. It was long after midnight and the shore was deserted. Presently I banged at the door of a tiny cottage and awaited developments. A masculine head appeared at an upstairs window and inquired what I wanted. I told him his fortune was made if he'd shelter me for the night. He came down and proved to be a very decent sort of chap, an olive grower. He struck a match and looked me over. I explained at some detail that I'd been to a masquerade in Naples and rowing home had fallen out of my boat. I don't think he heard half of my elaborate yarn, for fortunately for me that blessed dago had a sense of humour and I thought he'd never stop laughing. He finally helped me bandage up my wrist and I spent the remainder of the night at his house on the sofa. He lent me a suit in the morning and I went to a neighbouring doctor's and had my wrist bandaged properly. At a country inn near by, I telephoned Tony's brother, the hotel clerk, to hunt up Tony and ask him to call me up. Over the wire I arranged with our friend of the ramshackle cart to bring me a complete outfit from a Neapolitan store and stop for me on his way out to Beritola, all of which he performed very accurately, although I must say it staggered me when I saw that plaid suit. Did you happen to notice the socks and shirt, Kirke? I did my best to hide them. They were both plaid to match

the suit. It was Tony's idea of a stunning outfit, and some time I'm going to present it to him. The hat I put under the seat of the cart and rode home bareheaded. It had a brim nearly a foot wide.

"As to the geography of the passage, I imagine the series of caverns ends directly at the Tyrrhenian Sea in one of those caves that honeycomb the cliffs along the shore. The entrance is small and barricaded with a rock easily pushed aside if one knows the trick and goes far enough back into the open shore cave. It explains Count Teodoro's mysterious disappearance that day we were returning from Capri! You remember I mentioned it to you? There's a rude rock stairway shelving down to the sea from the cliffs. I imagine there's something similar at the side of the cliff too. His temper overcame him at the sight of our party and he took the quickest way out of our sight. He merely descended when I looked away, entered the shore cave, went to the rear and rolled aside the rock. Once he left the cliff, he was out of sight and could walk straight to the library of the castle without anyone being the wiser."

Kirke lay back in his chair, overwhelmed by a picture of his friend in the garb of another century dashing through the smugglers' cave and later hunting a refuge for the night.

"The gang didn't pursue you in the open?" he queried presently.

"No. I imagine they dared not make too much of a row on the shore so near the tunnel. To continue now about the notes. At first I didn't know just what use to make of the knowledge I'd gleaned. When I first heard the Count's and Giacomo's footsteps re-echoing behind me, I had decided to inform the royal authorities secretly on my own responsibility if I escaped and not to let Count Teodoro suspect my agency until he was captured. The thought of Signore Lamberti, however, flashed over me and the infinite possibilities of the exposure if he should inform the government, a proceeding by which he should certainly profit if there were any gratitude whatever in royal hearts. In this way I fancied he might even win absolution from that abominable tax! At first I determined to tell him the whole story. It speedily occurred to me, however, that with his conscientious, high-strung temperament, he'd flatly refuse to take credit for a discovery he hadn't made.

"The more I thought of it the more logical became the idea of Signore Lamberti himself warning the government. As the original owner of the castle, he doubtless knew of its peculiar structure and could lead the authorities straight to the point on the coast where the

passage ends, the only practicable way for them to enter it. Personally I'd never be able to find the shore entrance. And then, out of the clouds came the inspiration of those notes sent incognito, the only plausible method to my mind of stating the facts to Signore Lamberti and forcing him to warn the government. I waited until the august commissioners had visited Count Teodoro. That trip gave them the opportunity to notice the range of hills which extends from the coast to the castle window. It would help verify the suggestion of a secret passage when at last it should arrive in writing. Besides, the nearer the government comes to being hoodwinked by the rascal, the more dramatic will be the revelation. So I started my system of notes. In the old fellow's present dreamy state, I knew I would have to arouse and stimulate his interest little by little or I should not be able to hold it at all. Consequently each note of the series suggested a little more than its predecessor and made him eager for the next. How well it has worked, you probably know better than I. Kirke," he finished soberly, "you won't tell him the source of those notes? As you can see for yourself, he would insist upon my availing myself of the information."

Kirke silently held out his hand. This summer in Beritola had taught him a better understanding of his friend than all the

years of idle companionship that lay behind them.

"Signore Lamberti really has no positive, first-hand knowledge of Count Teodoro's rascality," suggested Kirke presently. "Do you think —"

"I had thought of that," interrupted Phil. "He can, however, describe the secret passage and suggest to the royal authorities that they investigate the matter. If they do some detective work, they'll soon find out enough to verify their worst suspicions and the result will be just the same as if I had tendered all my information as an eye witness. Wait — as the kid said when he coyly dropped the match into the keg of gunpowder — I shouldn't be 'sprised if sumthin' happened!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN NICCOLO'S HUT

PHIL, loitering by the Ciapelletto cottage late in the evening, paused abruptly at the sound of a sharp exclamation at one of the upstairs windows.

"*Madre!*" cried Lauretta wildly, "it cannot be! Here? — Mother of God!"

"Hush!" came Marietta's warning tones, "he is ill and we are to go to him at once. Niccolo says that none must know."

The voices dropped to an excited whisper. Alert and suspicious, Phil stepped into the shadows at the side of the cottage and waited. An instant later the two women emerged and hurried silently away. Convinced of their destination, the American followed. As he had suspected, they climbed the trail to the Villa Spa Gett and vanished in the pines above it. With a wild thrill of prescience, he waited until they were far up the mountain; then he, too, climbed to the summit. Outside the rude hut where Niccolo lived he paused and listened. There was an eager hum of voices within — subdued and indistinct. Spears of light flashed through the

crevices in the rough walls, and through them the American tried in vain to get a glimpse of the room within. Balked in his purpose, he sought the window at the side, a square patch of yellow light which cast a luminous shadow upon the ground outside, but here, too, the room was veiled from sight by a drawn shade, and with a shrug of resolution, Phil stepped to the door and entered.

Niccolo rose, a savage light in his eyes, and seated himself again with an odd shrug of his shoulders as he recognised the intruder. Marietta, for the first time in her tense, excitable life, seemed to have lost the power of speech, but there was a great fear in her eyes and she trembled violently. In a silence so intense that the night sounds of the mountain insects grew into a raucous commotion, the three stared at each other and finally turned their eyes of one accord to the far corner of the room. Lauretta was on her knees at the side of a rude couch, and by the light in her eyes Phil guessed the identity of the lad whose white face and burning eyes looked so ghost-like against the pillow. Pietro Masetto lay there, ill with a fever, his rambling sentences but the prelude of the delirium that was to follow. Raising himself upon his elbow, he cried aloud at the sight of the American:

"It is not Count Teodoro?" he said hoarsely.

"Mother of God! Tell me it is not Count Teodoro!"

"It is not Count Teodoro, Pietro," said Niccolo soothingly. "It is—" but Lauretta had wheeled in swift alarm and in passionate abandon she flung herself upon her knees before the American.

"*Eccellenza,*" she panted piteously, "you will not betray Pietro? He is ill unto death with fever. To-night he came secretly over the hills from Naples faint and tired and hungry—" her voice broke in a great sob—"and Niccolo has taken him in." Her wonderful, red-brown eyes, misty with tears and full of the prayer that was surging through her body, sought the American's face and rested upon it in an agony of pleading. "*Eccellenza,* Count Teodoro would have him put in the great prison, or, worse, he might kill him."

But Phil leaned over and gently raised the girl from the floor.

"Lauretta," he said kindly, "I followed you to-night because I, too, am his friend. I have more of an interest in the lad than any of you guess and I alone can straighten out the queer tangle of his life. See," he whimsically crossed the room and laid his hand upon a tattered Bible lying on a stand near the bed, "see, I swear by this that no one shall hear from me of Pietro's presence in Beritola."

Marietta passionately kissed his hand, and the look of gratitude in Lauretta's eyes seemed that of a tired child who had found unexpected rest.

"*Eccellenza* was always good!" she said simply.

Quietly Phil leaned over the feverish lad upon the couch. His great eyes, deep-sunken and burning fiercely with the light of fever, roved restlessly about the room, ever returning in momentary content to Lauretta. For an instant a question hovered upon the American's lips, but he silently repressed it. Pietro Masetto was fast sinking into incoherent delirium and with a great pity in his heart for the boy whose misery had been the result of an unscrupulous nobleman's scheming, he turned and left the hut, signalling Niccolo to follow.

"Niccolo," he said abruptly, "the boy must have everything he needs and I will pay for it. Much depends upon his recovery. It is good of you to take him in and hide him."

Niccolo slowly removed his pipe from his lips.

"'Tis but a poor return," he said, "that I can give the lad for telling that accursed stranger that he was in America. It has harmed him none, but Niccolo, the mountain *pecorajo,* does but few things of that sort. Besides, I talked much against him to taunt Marietta, and now that she has been so good and friendly — and, *Eccellenza,* there are many worse in Beritola

than Marietta —'tis but a slight return I can give her, too, for the favours she heaped upon me when she did but scratch my arm with a stiletto. *Corpo!* I had drunk too much wine with Carlo, and I needed it."

"A doctor?" questioned Phil anxiously.

"There is one in the valley who treats us all," said Niccolo. "I will go with you and summon him." And with a whispered word to Marietta who had come to the door behind him, he turned and followed the American down the mountain.

From the corner of the veranda, Phil watched Niccolo and the village doctor cautiously climb to the mountain hut. Later he intercepted the physician on his homeward trip.

"It is not serious," averred the little man, "but it is very slow and very weakening. He has been working in those accursed sulphur mines in Sicily and it has well-nigh killed him, along with all the worry and trouble that appears to be on his mind. It will be many days before he will know his friends, for he is already delirious," and he gratefully pocketed the money which the American had thrust into his hand, and proceeded down the trail, scratching his head in bewilderment at the size of the fee. It was a material endorsement of the wild tales in the valley concerning the huge coffers of gold which these mad Americans had brought with them!

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO VISITORS

IN spite of the uncertainty attending the eventual fate of the villa at Count Teodoro's hands and the outcome of Signore Lamberti's warning to the government, Kirke found the days that followed happy and tranquil. In his absorption, however, he failed to notice the abrupt cessation of letters from Mürren and the strange fact that Phil had once more begun his nightly disappearances.

Up in Niccolo's hut on the mountain, the bagpipe played no more in the gathering twilight. Pietro still lay there delirious, babbling of stolen violins, of Count Teodoro, of Signore Lamberti, of the American across the sea who had purchased the violin, of Lauretta and a mountain cottage covered with roses, of the Sicilian sulphur mines and a Neapolitan bank — a rambling story whose meaning Phil tried in vain to gather. Each night he crept up the mountain bearing wines and tempting delicacies purchased during his trips to Naples in the Panhard with the old Signorina, and sat by Pietro's bed alert for some explanation of the wild words that constantly hovered on the boy's

lips as he fought the fever. Marietta and Lauretta shared his watch, according the silent American a blind worship and trust that he found a little embarrassing. Were not all these delicacies and the careful arrangements in the hut for Pietro's comfort proof of *Eccellenza's* great-hearted generosity? Had he not brought from Naples one night in his strange carriage that needed neither horse nor mule, a great Neapolitan physician to verify the fat little village doctor's diagnosis? Since the great man's visit, Pietro had had intermittent spells of consciousness when he lay silent and apathetic, and Marietta firmly believed that he could attribute these to the influence of the American Signore.

Into the tangled web that the great spider Fate had spread over the little valley, stretching its meshes tighter and tighter as the days went by, presently came two others. They were driven over the hills from Naples by Tony, who proudly thumped the new bottom of his cart (a necessity since the fateful sightseeing trip) from time to time with the butt end of his whip, eyeing his feminine passengers in whom he was frankly interested, to see if they were properly impressed by its astonishing stability. Of the older woman's air of distinction the driver felt considerable awe; the dimples and smiles of the younger — a fair-haired girl of decided beauty — he had, however, found irresistible and

watched her colour come and go, as she laughed at his antics, with the air of a connoisseur. Pausing at the crest of the hillroad, Tony pointed below where the valley lay in the deepening glow of the morning sunlight, well content with the astonishment of his two passengers.

"Mother," cried the girl, "it *is* wonderful! See, there is the lake and the chapel, the villa with the hedge of red geraniums, and the castle!"

Tony flashed his handsome teeth in delight, readjusted his scarlet tie, and pointing his whip straight ahead gave a wild call to his horses and tore down the steep mountain road, raising a cloud of dust that settled thick upon them, much to the disgust of the elder woman whose face betrayed a constant fear of annihilation.

Tony presently collected a bundle of papers from which the string had been broken by the terrific bumping of the cart and clattered up a winding mountain trail at the end of the valley to the door of a cottage perched dizzily among the pines. He alighted with an exuberant roar that made the older woman jump.

Kirke appeared in the doorway and came to a startled halt. Tony had gallantly assisted his passengers to alight, and to his great astonishment the American found himself confronting two smiling faces which but an instant ago he had believed to be far away in Mürren.

"Mother would come, Kirke," said Margaret Bentley, laughing, "I simply could not persuade her otherwise. She's developed a vein of stubborness that would do credit to Grandfather Bentley himself!"

Kirke calmly finished his lunch and pushed back his chair.

"Mother and I are going to talk," he said pointedly. "Phil, this will be an excellent opportunity for you to show Margaret the sights of the valley!"

Two pairs of eyes flashed fire in his direction, but the offender was critically inspecting his cuff and seemed quite unaware of a certain commotion around the table. There was no help for it. Phil rose. Margaret, with an imploring look at the inexorable face of her brother, joined him and in silence the two departed.

But Margaret Bentley was at all times a thoroughbred and there was no hint of constraint in her manner as they descended the trail. At the foot of the castle hill she paused. The mass of stone stretched grimly along the ridge seemed to fascinate her and she grew very thoughtful.

"Mr. Ainsworth," she said pleasantly, voicing the presentiment in her mind, "Kirke wrote me about your sweetheart, the Signorina Emilia Lamberti. Does she live up there in the castle?"

She was gazing up at the grey walls and failed to see her companion's puzzled look or the flash of instant comprehension that followed. In spite of her careful control there had been a tone in her voice that pleased Mr. Ainsworth exceedingly.

"No," he said gravely, "she lives in the villa with the hedge of red geraniums about it. I'd like you to know her. She's the daintiest little lady that God ever made. We're going there now to see her!"

"Oh, no, no, no!" cried Margaret wildly, thrown off her guard by the abrupt announcement, almost as brutal in its way as Kirke's sudden suggestion at luncheon; then biting her lips with an angry shame in her heart she quietly added, "Of course! Let us go by all means."

Phil discreetly turned his head and smiled. Margaret Bentley's agitation had revealed a great deal more than she cared to own.

The villa was quiet; the tinkle of the fountain clearly audible in the afternoon hush. Phil well knew where they would find the old Signorina. She spent most of her afternoons in the old rose-garden, dozing and reading, as the mood seized her. With his heart throbbing out of all proportion to the magnificent airiness of his manner, Phil led the girl through the shrubbery at the side, past the statues and the marble fountain to the rose-garden beyond.

"Isn't — isn't this perhaps a little unceremonious?" she protested, and the corners of Phil's mouth twitched uneasily.

"Perhaps," he assented, "but then I'm practically one of the family!" a statement as truthful in point of fact as it was suggestive in intent.

The rose-garden was aglow with the last roses of the year, a choice variety blooming abundantly each month of the summer. Phil had wondered at the constant parade of blossoms as the summer advanced, little dreaming that it was the result of the old Signorina's careful study of horticulture. Aunt Emilia sat by a nodding rose-bush asleep in her chair, her small, white hands half hidden in the silken folds of her black gown, her hair and kerchief fluttering drowsily in the wind. A page of an open book that had slipped from her lap to the ground turned over and back as if propelled by the hand of an unseen reader. Margaret's eyes softened at the sight of the tranquil old dreamer soothed by a silent lullaby of breeze and blossom.

"What a dear, dear old lady!" she said gently.

Phil bent over the sleeper with a smile.

"Wake up, Aunt Emilia, wake up!" he called gaily. "I've brought you a visitor."

The old lady stirred and opened her eyes.

"*Caro mio,*" she exclaimed, smiling. "You startled me!" She paused, her eyes resting upon Margaret in gentle inquiry. Reverently Phil

raised her wrinkled hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Margaret," he said gently, "this is my sweetheart — quite the dearest old lady in all the world!"

"You are the Signorina Emilia!" cried Margaret, colouring. "Oh, Phil, I didn't know!"

"And you are Margaret!" exclaimed the old lady delightedly in English, "Phil has told me all about you!" With a sob Margaret slipped to her knees, burying her face in the folds of the old Signorina's gown. "There, there, dearie," went on Aunt Emilia, patting the girl's fair hair with a gentle hand, "don't cry! Tell me all about it!" and nodding eagerly she heard the story of the quarrel, of Kirke's thoughtless postscript and his omission of her age.

"Margaret!" Phil laid his hand gently upon the girl's shoulder.

"Yes," she said. "I thought," but Phil caught her up in his arms with a happy laugh.

"God bless Kirke!" was all he said.

Back at the Villa Spa Gett Kirke had been quite frank. There had been no reservations in the story he quietly laid before his mother. The purchase of the Stradivarius, its strange history, the story of the Lambertis, of Count Teodoro, of Phil's generous aid, of Lauretta and Pietro, Marietta and Niccolo, of his picture painted to prove his creative equality (at which the mother had

bridled), the unwinding of the silver thread had fascinated her until it led her son to Beatrice. His frank statement of his love for the daughter of Signore Lamberti had been received with strong disapproval, the way of mothers all over the world.

"You are so impulsive, Kirke!" sighed his mother. "I should so much more have preferred an American girl," and yielding at length to his urgent persuasion she reluctantly accompanied him to the Lamberti villa.

"Yes," she thought as Signore Lamberti ushered them through the villa to the rose-garden at the rear, "it's just like a dream. Who ever thought that a violin could make all this trouble?"

Her face unconsciously betrayed her inward trepidation. Phil, covertly watching her, saw that the dear lady already knew the history of their eventful summer and was trying hard to adjust herself to a condition of affairs quite unsuspected.

The mother's eyes rested upon Beatrice in silent appraisement.

"She's very beautiful and very proud," she decided wistfully. "There's pride in all three of these Lamberti faces. I wish, oh, I do wish I knew what I think about it all," and Mrs. Bentley brushed her forehead in genuine distress.

Gradually, however, to her secret astonish-

ment, she found her troubled thoughts succumbing to the charm of the Lamberti hospitality. The feeling of unrest slipped away and the mother was shocked at her growing tranquillity. When the supper hour arrived and a table was brought out to the old rose-garden and set with the quaint family silver and china, Mrs. Bentley found herself silently approving everything about her. Alarmed by her own mental revolution she glanced at Margaret and found a face radiant with enjoyment. The old Signorina smilingly arranged a bowl of roses on the table, and as Signore Lamberti grandly bowed her to her chair, the mother with a sigh surrendered herself to the witchery of her Italian surroundings. The quiet courtesy of this handsome Italian, the dear old sister with her snowy hair and dark eyes, her black gown and white lace kerchief (what a wonderful resemblance between the two and what a host of delightful reminiscences the old Signorina had told in her soft, pretty voice!); the old silver and china; this quiet rose-garden with the rustic arbour of purple grapes (what a sense of the artistic these Italians displayed in everything!); the girl Lauretta (Mrs. Bentley had gasped in amazement when her eyes first fell upon the beautiful peasant girl in her bizarre costume of red and yellow), and — and Beatrice! Mrs. Bentley's eyes returned to the girl's face for the hundredth time.

"Dear me," sighed the mother, "I guess Kirke is right. I'm afraid I should have fallen in love with her myself, but I do wish she were an American!"

The night was aglitter with stars when at last the Americans rose to go.

"I have had a communication from the government to-day," said Signore Lamberti to Kirke in a low voice. "It contains a request to lead their officers to the coast entrance of the secret passage."

"You will go?" questioned Kirke eagerly.

"Yes. In the morning. I shall go to Napoli for a few days, though I shall of course take care to spread the impression that I have gone on a visit for the peasants' gossip. The authorities seem grateful for the information," he added wistfully.

"They should be!" averred Kirke heartily. "You have done them an invaluable service."

The Italian shook his head.

"No," he said thoughtfully as Kirke held out his hand in farewell, "the mysterious author of those notes is the real benefactor!"

"Well, Mother?" The quiet voice bore a question that the mother had dreaded. She looked off to the South at the glare of the great volcano; ahead at Margaret and Phil, effacing the last of the summer's misunderstanding, and

back again to Kirke, his dark face alight with expectation. A great wave of loneliness swept over her. Margaret and Kirke both! The hand she laid upon her son's arm trembled a little.

"Kirke," she said with a little sob, "she's very lovely. I — I hope you may win her!"

Out on the porch of the mountain cottage Margaret, too, heard the story of the summer and went to bed in a glow of excitement. Kirke had given up his room and gone in with Phil, and the girl lay quiet beside her mother rehearsing the romantic story of Camillo Lamberti's violin. Mrs. Bentley, too, was wakeful, listening to the sounds of the night-birds in the pines and the throaty plaint of the treetoads. Unless Kirke objected, she, too, would stay to see this little drama played out to the end, when the Count should come to his final reckoning and Kirke restore the violin to Signore Lamberti.

Margaret stirred uneasily and sat up.

"Mother," she whispered eagerly, "couldn't we stay? I never was so interested before in my life!"

"My dear," confessed her mother deprecatingly, "wild horses couldn't drag me away if Kirke will let us stay!"

CHAPTER XXX

COUNT TEODORO'S FINAL RECKONING

SIGNORE LAMBERTI went to Naples the following morning. He left openly, riding away with Tony, a great old-fashioned bag in his hand to foster the general impression that he had gone on a visit. He was apparently quite calm, but excitement lent a spring to his step and an added fire to his eye. His patriotism, too broad to harbour malice, had flamed up anew at this prospect of rendering his beloved Italy a service.

He was absent four days, during which Mrs. Bentley and Margaret revelled in the quiet charm of the Italian valley. Nature was flaunting her royal banner of purple grapes and late figs; a golden haze, harbinger of the autumn, lay over the land by day, and at night a mist of violet encircled the moon. The sun was as prodigal of his burning rays in September as he had been in August, but at twilight a delightful coolness crept out from the mountain pines and fanned the heated earth. The Villa Spa Gett was daily deserted for the old rose-garden at the Lambertis' where the old Signorina delighted to open her "memory chest" for Margaret as she had done for Phil. Aunt Emilia alone, however, of all

the little participants in the drama playing itself out in the waning summer was tranquil and content. She knew nothing of the Count's smuggling or of the mysterious series of notes, and where the minds of the others were heavily freighted with conjecture, she gave herself up to the delight of the golden summer.

Signore Lamberti returned as unpretentiously as he had left. When the two Americans joined him at the villa, he was alive with a boyish eagerness to tell the story of his four days in Napoli. Much to Kirke's delight, he courteously recounted the history of the mysterious slips of paper, as an explanatory preamble, to Phil, who maintained the face of a stoic.

"I have already told Beatrice and Emilia," he added. "It seemed best in the light of what the day may bring forth. And of course, Signori, it is needless for me to say that this narration of mine is in absolute confidence for a very evident reason as you will note during its progress. You will remember I went to Napoli on Tuesday. Tuesday evening a secret service man and myself boarded a revenue cutter lying in the bay and proceeded up the northern coast to a point I indicated, where a boat was lowered and we landed in the general locality of the coast entrance to the passage. We had to conduct our investigations with the utmost care, for, had we been discovered, our lives would undoubtedly have paid

the forfeit. We were both equipped with shrill whistles to summon the revenue cutter if need be, and we were heavily armed. The coast at this point is wild and rocky and we soon discovered a great similarity in the cliffs and caves along the water. To my great dismay and humiliation, I was unable to locate the entrance to the passage and we were obliged to return to Napoli. I have explained to you, Signore Bentley, that the series of caverns which complete the passage, open into a deep shore cave roofed by a bluff above the water. This by a series of rude projections shelves down to the sea on one side and to the cave beneath on the other. Thus one may enter by land or sea. Rowing into one of the caves that honeycomb the bluff, you find a ledge of rock at the side above the level of the water. This leads far back through impenetrable gloom to the entrance blocked by a rock, all in such heavy darkness even in daytime that a stranger would find it impossible to locate. The smugglers, I imagine, row in one by one from the sea and land secretly upon the ledge beneath the bluff.

"We searched diligently again the following night and eventually found both the shore cave and the entrance rock. We returned to the cutter and later accompanied by eight armed men entered the passage, stationed our men near the entrance, and the secret service man and

myself went on ahead to explore the tunnel. Equipped with electric torches which one could snap off or on at will, we traversed the entire length of the passage to the foot of the flight of stairs which leads up to a secret door in the castle library and found it silent and deserted. The secret service man was frankly astounded at the ingenuity of the Lamberti who had availed himself of the natural caverns in the hills to construct such a passageway. We encountered no one that night, but my companion was delighted with our night's work. Thursday night we returned, entered silently as before, and again stationed our men in the first of the caves near the entrance. This time we scarcely entered before we heard the voices of two men just ahead of us. They were apparently on their way to an appointed rendezvous. After a time we followed. Presently we heard a number of men talking, and although we dared not approach near enough to get a glimpse of them, we heard quite enough for our purposes.

"'A devil of a time we've had getting that big diamond!' growled one. 'The other crowd is holding it up. The Count says he must have it by Saturday or one of our lives will pay the forfeit.'

"'Why, Saturday?'

"'The government will send to the castle then for the royal diamonds.'

"We listened for some time and discovered that this precious band of scoundrels are getting their diamonds from a gang of thieves operating in another country whence they were smuggled in to the Count, who has guaranteed to dispose of them under cover of his scientific discovery.

"'Rek says we can have it Friday night,' said a man who had not spoken before. He was presently dispatched along the passage to the castle to inform Count Teodoro that the big diamond would be brought to the central cave Friday at midnight.

"We suspected that Count Teodoro's temper is violent and uncertain, and that the men are in the main somewhat afraid of him. Indeed our suspicion was corroborated by what we overheard.

"'No one has told the Count yet of that long-haired maniac who went yelling and screaming through the caves?' questioned one of the smugglers and the man Giuseppe answered glumly:

"'Who would dare? He would kill one of us if he knew that a stranger had blundered into the passage. I told him we were chasing Pasqualina in a game we sometimes play. He grumbled much at the noise we had made.'

"Friday night we stationed a boatload of heavily armed men at a point up the coast. Another force was concealed in the first cave of the passage. Well, Signori," the Italian smiled,

"it was quite the simplest, most orderly proceeding that ever occurred. The smugglers entered silently, one by one at discreet intervals, on their way to the rendezvous to meet the Count, and as each of the rascals arrived he was surrounded, bound, gagged and laid aside before he could guess what had happened. Very quiet, no disorder, not even a gunshot. We waited some time after the last capture to make sure that we had them all, and by eleven-thirty that band of rogues was aboard the revene cutter in chains and the big diamond was in the possession of the government, in a vastly different manner, however, than the Count had planned."

"But Count Teodoro himself!" gasped Kirke.

"Just a minute, my boy, I am coming to that too. The first plan was to await the Count's arrival in the rendezvous at midnight Friday (last night) and overpower him as we had done the rest. On second thought, however, the officials decided to allow the Count to return to the Castle, probably somewhat angered at the failure of his gang to keep their appointment. The general opinion was that this would not arouse his suspicion, since by the admission of the men themselves, overheard by us, they had repeatedly failed him before. His natural inference would be that they had failed to procure the big diamond and had shirked the meeting, fearing his rage. Before another night should arrive when

their continued absence might suggest their fate, the Commission accompanied by the detachment of soldiers would be at the castle, ostensibly to get the diamonds, in reality to arrest Count Teodoro. In this way the diamonds could be confiscated, partly as evidence, partly because the government takes a malicious delight in getting possession of smuggled stock. At this very instant, gentlemen, Count Teodoro is awaiting the Commission at the castle, doubtless raging at his inability to produce the great diamond already in the hands of the government! He has doubtless planned to deliver the stones that are ready and ask for more time."

"It's a big risk," said Phil slowly. "If by any chance Count Teodore hears of it —"

"Impossible!" declared the Italian. "The entrance to the passage was heavily guarded all night and no one sought to leave or enter it."

At ten the imposing coach of the Commission appeared on the crest of the hillroad and drove rapidly to the castle. It was escorted by a glittering detachment of cavalry to guard the diamonds on their way to the King. Once more the peasants poured from their houses and gaped in awe at the resplendent uniforms and dashing horses. The visit was brief. The Commissioners presently reappeared and returned to the waiting coach; they were closely followed by

Count Teodoro and Giacomo, heavily handcuffed and guarded by three soldiers who rudely thrust them into the rear of the great coach and directed the driver to stop at the Lamberti villa. Count Teodoro's handsome face went white. The thought of facing the mocking eyes of the peasants was as nothing to this crowning ignominy of confronting the Lambertis. The coach pulled up grandly at the hedge of fire and as the door beneath the portico opened in the hand of Signore Lamberti himself, Count Teodoro shrank far back into the shadows.

"Ah, Signore Lamberti," exclaimed the head of the Commission, a stately white-haired man whose prominence in court circles was of international fame, "we have him, as you see, and the diamonds as well!"

One by one the commissioners shook hands with the man who had so loyally aided his government. All of them knew his story and now meeting the man himself, straight and tall with honest eyes burning steadily beneath his snowy crown of hair, they silently honoured him. As the great coach slowly rolled away, the Head Commissioner leaned once more from the window.

"Signore Lamberti," he said significantly, "you will hear from a grateful government in a few days."

As the coach toiled slowly up the hillroad,

there was a slight diversion mystifying to all but two of its inmates. A tall American with a dare-devil grin upon his face emerged from a clump of pine trees and softly played the *Miserere* upon a flute. Count Teodoro started at first in horrified amazement; then, as he met the significant eyes of the player, the look changed to one of sudden comprehension and malevolence.

"'My God, Giacomo, there it is again!'" quoted the American in deep, guttural imitation of the Count's voice, and as the coach rolled ponderously on, he bowed profoundly.

The communication "from a grateful government" came by special messenger three days later and Signore Lamberti read it aloud to the inmates of the rose-garden. His dark face flushed as he read and he trembled violently. The communication bore the royal seal and ran as follows:

"His Royal Highness first wishes to thank Signore Dioneo Lamberti for his active assistance in apprehending that clever smuggler, Count Teodoro di Gomito. In view of the peculiar circumstances connected with the case and in view of the injustice which Signore Lamberti has suffered at the hands of his own government in the loss of his title and his castle (an injustice which His Royal Highness begs to state that he did not fully understand until quite recently when it was pointed out to him by his valued

minister, Signore Benedetto Abbato), in view of these facts then be it said, His Majesty in the name of the Kingdom of Italy and his beloved subjects, out of the gratitude of his heart and the sincere regret of previous injustice, does hereby restore to Signore Dioneo Lamberti his castle in the valley of Beritola with its attendant annuity, and his title of Count to take effect immediately. By his own request Signore Abbato will bear to Count Dioneo the necessary documentary transfer."

"Thank God!" cried the old Italian, proudly flinging back his head. "Thank God! *Italia adorata!*" and Aunt Emilia cried softly into the depths of her lace handkerchief.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE VIOLIN

A WEEK later the Italian press printed the entire story of the Count's treacherous diamond-deal. The smuggler had recognised the futility of defence and confessed in full. The papers praised the able assistance of Count Dioneo Lamberti, detailed the restoration of the Lambertis to their ancestral castle and eulogised the rare charm and fertility of the quiet vale hidden away in the heart of the green hills.

Phil read the account and laid aside his paper to answer a sharp rap at the door. Niccolo stood on the porch, his perturbed face hinting of a rude upheaval in his habitual philosophy of life. Phil motioned him to the side of the house with a warning gesture.

"*Eccellenza,*" said the shepherd abruptly, "Pietro is gone!"

"You mean," said the American slowly, "that he has run away?"

"Just that. I left him this morning for a few minutes, just as I have done many other mornings since he has grown stronger, and when I returned he was gone. He is still weak and thin, and I know not how he managed his legs, but

managed them he has, so well that there is no trace of him in the valley. Lauretta thinks he has been frightened away."

"How?"

"I know not! There has been nothing said of the great trouble on his mind. I have wanted much to tell him of the smugglers and the Count's downfall, but since the day I mentioned Count Teodoro's name and the lad screamed and fainted — curses on my thick skull! I have obeyed *Eccellenza's* orders and risked no further setbacks by my idle tongue. I have talked of all other things under the sun but the things he so raved about."

Phil turned and climbed the mountain to the hut without a word, Niccolo close at his heels. He threw back the bed-clothes and uttered a sharp exclamation. A fresh newspaper lay there with the account of Count Teodoro's imprisonment uppermost.

"You see," said Phil quietly, "someone has left this while you were gone; it is dated this morning, and the lad has read it."

He scanned the paper with puzzled eyes. It was the Neapolitan *Tribuna,* another copy of the paper he had been reading when Niccolo arrived. It merely served, however, to deepen the mystery in his own mind.

"*Eccellenza,*" declared Niccolo stoutly, voicing the American's thought, "who has left the

newspaper in my absence I know not and care less, but it seems to me that the news would but make the lad feel the more secure from that accursed scoundrel's persecutions. It is what I had wished to tell him for several days. Why should he run away?"

"God knows!" exclaimed Phil bitterly. He felt annoyed and discouraged. Pietro's odd flitting left the remaining knots in the silver cord still untangled. With a shrug the American descended the mountain and entered the Villa Spa Gett, thwarted at the end by the hysterical impulse of a sick peasant lad. Kirke was too absorbed in the letter before him to notice the shadow upon his friend's face. A small blue card lay upon the table and Phil bent over and read it aloud. It bore the words:

"Nocturnia, Kirke Renwood Bentley, The Golden Cross."

The letter with it was brief and enthusiastic.

"By the way," it read in conclusion, "I find in some ancient records of Golden Cross awards mention of one Niccolo Lamberti who hails from the same valley in which you are spending your summer. Keep going, keep going. To a man with your genius, it is my only advice!

"SALVATORE."

Late that afternoon Kirke borrowed the Panhard and went to Naples for the violin. Phil had quietly made the suggestion without offering

any explanation of his sudden decision and the other, nothing loath to obey the reinforcement of his own desire, had hastened away over the hills, gauging the speed of the great machine to the rushing song of his blood. It was a mad race in the afterglow of the sunset facing a sky of gold and a wind of pine and orange. The blue of the sea was deeper and life lay ahead, gloriously alight with ambition and love!

With the precious Stradivarius once more in his possession, Kirke sought the road to Beritola and drove swiftly homeward. It was dusk when he reached the valley, a purple dimness replete with memory. Where the road skirted the lake he stopped the throbbing of the Panhard engine and sat silent. The soft tones of an organ had reached his ear and he knew that Beatrice was in the chapel. All about the lake lay a grey stillness, of which the organ melody and the sound of the lapping water strangely enough seemed a harmonious part. Kirke opened the case and reverently touched the old Stradivarius within it. An inanimate thing, yes! a thing of wood and string and varnish fashioned into immortality by the thin fingers of an old man, but from his trip to Beritola to Count Teodoro's downfall and Signore Lamberti's consequent restoration to honour and prominence in his native land, the violin had been at first the cause of the tangled thread of silver and later of its un-

ravelling. The friendship of this girl whose fingers played the requiem of the dying day in the lakeside chapel; his own awakening from intellectual lethargy; the Golden Cross; it had given him all these! In pagan days he would have bent his knee to the old violin and voiced his gratitude in a prayer of idolatry, but to-night he laid his fingers gently across the strings with a sudden mist in his eyes and a great prayer of thankfulness in his heart. And with it, too, had come a better understanding of Philip Ainsworth, the man who had quietly slipped off a lifetime cloak of indolence and frivolity when there was work to do; hunting the lost Stradivarius; exploring the secret passage at the risk of his life; generously imparting his information incognito to the man who could best benefit by it, and shrinking away like an embarrassed schoolboy at the first word of thanks! In a sudden impulse Kirke bared his head in tribute to Philip Ainsworth.

The sound of the organ had ceased. It was growing darker. Kirke heard the dip of paddles and he knew by the sound that Beatrice was creeping softly across the lake shadows she loved in fanciful obedience to the whim that they were slumbering nymphs of the night. A wave of tenderness swept over the man sitting silently in the Panhard. Her fancies were as the setting of gold for a rare jewel. She was going home

through the twilight to the old rose-garden where even now his mother and Margaret and Phil sat in the perfect understanding of a growing friendship. And in a little while he, too, would join them, bearing in his hands Camillo Lamberti's violin brought back to them from across the seas.

The moon had risen by the time he had delivered the Panhard into Riley's capable hands, a delicate glory that thrilled him with its tranquil light. A wonderful peace lay brooding over the valley, over the trees and hills, over the gabled houses and the silent castle grimly stretched along the ridge. The hedge of fire, too, was bathed in its tender glow. Ah — yes! it had indeed been a hedge of fire and he had passed through the cleansing fire purged of the old, morbid discontent.

At the side of the villa he paused in the shadow of a thicket of ilex. Ahead he could see the old rose-garden irradiated by the white light of the moon. They were all there, Beatrice, his mother, Margaret, Phil, Aunt Emilia, and Signore Lamberti whose laugh rang out happily to-night from time to time. The American watched the scene, his eyes alight with memories of the summer. The old rose-garden, silvered now by a moonlight which rendered leaf and rose and grape oddly ethereal, had given him many happy hours, and, thank God! would give him many more. As he took a step forward, eager

to lay the Stradivarius in the hands of its rightful owner, the shrubbery ahead of him suddenly rustled and parted and a figure crept to the old rose-garden and flung itself at Signore Lamberti's feet with a low moan. Kirke, following softly and swiftly in the shadow of the date trees, could see the ragged clothes and the soiled handkerchief knotted below a face white and wan and sick.

"Ah, Signore, Signore!" he moaned, "God forgive me!"

It was Pietro, ragged and dusty with his day's travel, and instinctively Kirke stepped back into shadow. Phil had leaped to his feet at the sight of the Italian lad, quietly reseating himself again, however, with a sudden premonition of the boy's intention. To the American, Pietro's odd disappearance of the morning had explained itself.

"You gave me the music, master, you opened the gates here and I—" the lad choked and buried his face in his hands. Presently he looked up, his eyes full of unnatural light, and laid a roll of bills in Signore Lamberti's hands. "Take it, master," he cried, "take it! It is accursed for me. Pietro Masetto's soul is sick within him!"

"Pietro, be calm!" said Signore Lamberti quietly, "I do not quite understand you. Why are you here?"

"He is in prison. I saw it in the papers this morning and I fear him no longer!"

"Who?"

"Count Teodoro di Gomito, Signore. He tempted me, he — he —" the boy flung himself face downward in an agony of abasement and his shoulders shook in the gust of passion that swept over him.

"Pietro," exclaimed Signore Lamberti sternly, "you must calm yourself." He bent over and laid his hand firmly on the prostrate lad's shoulders. "The *padrone,*" he said slowly, "asks it of you as a favor to him! Tell me the story."

"Master, oh God! it was Pietro, Pietro whom you took into your house and taught the music, Pietro who like the dog that he is stole your violin!"

And again he threw himself upon the grass in passionate abandon. For an instant a great silence fell over the rose-garden. When Signore Lamberti at length spoke his voice trembled oddly.

"My — my violin, Pietro? My Stradivarius?" He leaned forward, no longer able to control his excitement. "Speak, speak, Pietro. Where is it?"

Pietro looked up, his face deathly white in the moonlight, his eyes burning with misery.

"I sold it, Signore Lamberti —" the tones

were so full of shame and so low that Kirke strained to hear them — "sold it in America when I was hungry and sick for Italy and Lauretta. With the money I came home and since I have earned again as much as the American paid me. You take it, master, it has eaten my heart out."

"You spoke of Count Teodoro. Tell the story in your own way."

Pietro gulped. The quiet tones of his beloved *padrone,* however, had in part soothed away his agitation. He sank on one knee and bowed his head, a humble peasant at the feet of his master.

"Signore Lamberti knows," he said quietly, "that Pietro Masetto was an idle fellow who hated work, that he loved better to lie on the hills and play his violin, trying to catch the songs of the birds and playing out the stories that grew in his mind." He paused. "I loved Manuel's Lauretta, Signore," he added finally, "but Manuel always said, 'Too lazy, Pietro. These music stories you play bring in no bread. When you get a little house and a vegetable garden, then you may have Lauretta.'

"Count Teodoro knew all this, Signore. One day he came to me on the hills. 'Pietro,' he said, 'you have seen Signore Lamberti's violin? It is old, it is bewitched, it is possessed of a thousand devils and has always brought him bad luck. He keeps it, for he is afraid to part with

it, fearing he will be accursed. Should it disappear through no fault of his, he would indeed be happy!' I said nothing, for at first I understood nothing of what he was about to say. Presently he added, 'Pietro, you steal for me this accursed violin and I will give you for your very own the little house in the pines on Niccolo's mountain.'"

"The Villa Spa Gett!" thought Kirke in wonder. It was but another curious development in the history of the summer. He had come to live in the cottage that had been the temptation of the lad who sold him the Stradivarius!

"At first," continued Pietro, "I said no! that I could not steal from the *padrone,* but he talked and talked; of the bad luck the violin had brought and how the *padrone* had lost his castle and his land because of it. I know now that it is not true, for I have been told that the *padrone* lost his castle long before he owned the violin, but I believed it then and grew to dream of the cottage on the mountain where Lauretta and I might live in happiness. The thought of it haunted me day and night. Perhaps if I did not steal the violin there would be no happiness for me in this world. So little by little," Pietro's tones were full of shame, "I grew to think more of stealing. I would look at the cottage in the pines and back again at Lauretta, and my head would reel and grow crazy. What happiness

could be mine and all for stealing an old violin that had brought the *padrone* much bad luck!" He paused and added with an effort, "The temptation was too strong, Signore. One night I crept into the villa while you sat here in the rose-garden as you do to-night. You trusted everyone in Beritola and gave no thought to your open doors and windows. I — I stole the violin and fled through the valley to Niccolo's mountain. Above the mountain cottage Count Teodoro awaited me. I had promised to bring the violin there to him and I did. I laid it in his hands and when he saw it safe in his possession, he began to taunt me and laughed at my anger. Of course he would not give me the cottage, he said. He had not meant to at any time. It was too big a price to pay for a small favour, and more, he reminded me that I dared not murmur against it or he would expose my theft, take the violin back to Signore Lamberti and explain that he had caught me stealing it. He maddened me, Signore. We quarrelled and I grew furious. In blind rage, I seized a heavy stone from the mountainside and struck him on the head. He fell like a log. I leaned over him, he seemed to be quite dead, and with the awful horror in my heart that I was not only a thief but a murderer as well, and that I dared never see the light of another morning in Beritola, I took the violin and fled with it under cover of

the night over the hills to Napoli, my only thought to get away, far away from the man I had robbed and the other man I had murdered.

"From Napoli I fled to America with money borrowed from my cousin who knew that my promise to repay was good. In America I tried to work and forget. But I grew so homesick for Lauretta and Beritola that I knew not what to do. I grew sick in body too and could not work; then I grew hungry and wandered about the streets and later in the country. Once I showed the violin to an Italian. He looked at me strangely and offered me two hundred dollars for it. He was anxious to buy it, but I was not hungry enough yet to sell the *padrone's* violin, and I wandered on. I grew thinner and hungrier day by day and finally when I had grown desperate I remembered the Italian's offer. I thought since my heart is so homesick for Italy and Lauretta, I will sell the violin for two hundred dollars, cross the ocean again and go to Beritola in the night. Then I can take Lauretta away in secret to Sicily, where no one will know of Pietro Masetto's crime. I hunted again for the Italian. He was not to be found and they sent me to a young American Signore, very rich and very fond of music.

"Signore Lamberti, I sold the violin for two hundred dollars and my hell commenced. Your face, your voice, your kindness haunted me day

and night. I came back to Italy homesick and heartsick. In Napoli I grew frantic with the memories of your kindness. I prayed to the Holy Mother for relief, and when I arose from my knees I knew that I must make atonement or die of the awful pain in my heart. I knew then that I should never have sold the violin, and so I thought to earn as much money as the American had paid me and bring it to you, confessing all. I went to Sicily and worked in the sulphur mines; at night, too, I worked with the Sicilian fishermen to get more money, and presently when I had saved as much as the American paid me, I came back to Napoli and started over the hills at night for Beritola. The pain was gnawing at my heart and I longed to confess to the *padrone* and give him the money. I crept back of the hills and came down to Beritola over the far side of Niccolo's mountain, stopping to look up at the cottage in the pines. A man chased me up the mountain again. Back of the hills on the other side of Beritola, I questioned a boy who told me that Count Teodoro was still alive when I had thought him dead, and I guessed then that it had been he who chased me, that he meant to kill me, so that I might not tell the story of the violin. Back in my cousin's house at Napoli I grew ill. One night I felt that I must see Lauretta or die, and again I stole over the hills to the other side of Niccolo's mountain.

In front of his hut, I dropped of weariness and he took me in. Lauretta and Marietta came to me. I have been sick unto death for many days hidden away up there in Niccolo's hut. He and the kind American have given me back my life.

"This morning Tony came up to the hut with a paper telling of Count Teodoro's smuggling and his imprisonment. Niccolo was not there and we talked and talked. I told Tony much, of the money in the Neapolitan bank which I had saved and how I was no longer afraid to go to Signore Lamberti now that the Count was in prison. 'Pietro,' said Tony, laying his hand upon my arm, 'slip down the far side of the mountain and I will come for you. You can get your money from the bank and I will bring you back to Beritola after you have rested. Take it then to Signore Lamberti and tell him all!' And I did as he said. He drove me into Napoli and back to-night in the cool of the evening, for I had grown weak. I offered him money, but he said, 'Pietro, God knows I love to gather *soldi,* but I take them not from a sick lad such as you. Go to Signore Lamberti. If the American *Eccellenza* can show you the great kindness he has, 'tis but little that Truthful Tony can do for one of his own kind!'"

Phil silently marvelled at the inconsistent vagaries of the dare-devil driver. His kindly offer to Pietro had been an odd climax indeed

to his whirlwind progress through the valley that morning. Early that afternoon Phil had heard the story of Tony's arrival in Beritola with a cart full of the newspapers containing the account of Count Teodoro's imprisonment, and he had rightly guessed the identity of the hand that had taken the *Tribuna* to the mountain hut. The financier of Napoli, whose commercial progress had until this summer been impeded by so many obstacles, had instantly foreseen the marketable value of the *Tribuna* and its flaring headlines in the village where Count Teodoro had lived and schemed; where he had made his scientific researches and antagonised the peasants and whence he had flitted away in a great coach as suddenly as he had come many years before. The news vendor had made the rounds of the valley, selling his papers at thrice their value with an infinity of brazen grins. Eventually he had climbed the mountain that he might not miss Niccolo's pittance and there, of course, he had found Pietro. Verily those accursed conspirators so often quoted by their victim had not foreseen the redoubtable Tony's wild speculation in newspapers.

"Put me in prison if you will, Signore," begged Pietro humbly. "My soul is sick and I care for naught but your forgiveness."

But there was no thought of prison in the kindly face of the man who bent over the

stricken lad at his feet and gently touched his shoulder. "Stand up, Pietro," he said quietly. "Be a man. God knows you are not a thief, not as I understand the word. Count Teodoro was the guilty one," but the boy broke in with a hopeless misery in his voice. There was a simple dignity in his conception of ethics. The hand that had taken the violin belonged to him, then why not the guilt?

"No — no, Signore," he said, "I, Pietro, am the thief. I took the violin, I sold it, and I am here to make what atonement I can."

"Not so much dishonest, Pietro, as weak." Kirke thrilled at the generous words. "Count Teodoro held out an alluring prospect to you in the mountain cottage and you fell. God knows you have suffered enough and I can not find it in my heart to do aught but forgive you."

Kirke silently stepped from the shadows.

"You are quite right, Signore Lamberti," he said quietly. "Count Teodoro is the real malefactor in this affair and I am the American to whom Pietro sold your violin. That is what brought me to Beritola." He gravely laid the violin case upon the Italian's knees and turned to Pietro. "Get up, Pietro," he said kindly. "It was I, too, who chased you up the mountain that night and I wanted just this story you have told to-night."

"My—my violin! Signore Bentley," there was

a sudden quiver in the old Italian's voice, "you — you don't — you can't mean that this is my Stradivarius!"

"Just that." Kirke bent and opened the case and as the musician saw the familiar lines of his beloved instrument and the delicate sheen of the satin varnish, he sank back in his chair and buried his face in his hands.

"God is good!" he said brokenly. "It is very wonderful."

With a sudden cry Pietro seized Kirke's hand and stared wonderingly up into his face.

"*Eccellenza,*" he cried, a great astonishment in his voice, "you brought the violin back!" The American's discovery of the owner seemed to him supernatural.

Striving to regain his self-control, Signore Lamberti suddenly stooped and picked up Pietro's roll of money.

"Take your money, Pietro," he said. "I had no intention of taking it. It belongs to Eccellenza Bentley." But Kirke shook his head.

"Keep it, Pietro!" he said. "It is but a small return for the suffering the violin has brought you and the happiness it has brought me."

Aunt Emilia's fine old face bore traces of recent tears, but there was a great excitement in her eyes. Now even as a hush fell over the rose-garden again, Lauretta appeared in the villa

door, a wonderful light in her red-brown eyes.

"Pietro, my Pietro!" she cried with a sob. "You have come back. I had thought you were gone again!"

"Yes, Lauretta," said the boy humbly, "back, and a man once more, thanks to the blessed *padrone* and the honest American from over the sea."

The two went off into the night. At the arbour Pietro paused, his dark face telling what his lips could not.

"May the Holy Mother send you all the best she has!" he said abruptly, and the boy's simple words were a blessing that touched them all.

"Weak, just weak!" exclaimed Signore Lamberti. "The boy is no more a thief than I am. He loves with an Italian's fire, and his love for Lauretta tempted him too strongly. My mind is still a confused tangle," he added, passing his hand mechanically over his forehead, "God has been very good to me. Will you tell me the whole story, Signore Bentley, that I may come to a better understanding of things?"

And quietly Kirke told him the story of the summer, of his purchase from Pietro, of the trip to Beritola, the subsequent theft of the Stradivarius from his own trunk and Phil's part in its recovery. Signore Lamberti listened gravely.

"You have a sense of honour that is unusual, Signore Bentley!" he interrupted abruptly.

"Few people would have come to an obscure valley for a similar reason."

He smiled at the account of the ghost flute that had played under the castle window and a little later grew very thoughtful. Suddenly he crossed to Phil and laid his hand upon the American's shoulder.

"Signore Ainsworth," he said quietly, "you sent me those notes! I know now that it could have been no other." Phil flushed a little and strove to speak, but the other went on simply, "My boy, I thank you. My Stradivarius has brought with it the best friends of my life." Abruptly he turned away, deeply shaken by powerful emotion. To these two Americans who had stepped in and mended the broken thread of his life, words were somehow impossible.

"It is scarcely credible," he said presently, "that Count Teodoro could have stolen the Stradivarius for the motives you mention, Signore Bentley, but the facts bear it out. Yes, yes, I see it all. He alone knew of the violin's value and its history, its peculiar formation and the part it was playing in my opera; how I had planned to try for the prize that I might free the villa from its burden of debt." And a little later he added, "God have mercy upon his soul!"

"Count Teodoro was so clever," suggested Phil, smiling, "that he outwitted even himself.

He paid the tax and to-day you benefit by it."

Signore Lamberti held up the Stradivarius.

"Now, now, with your aid, my wonderful wizard," he said, "I can finish my opera!" He threw back his head with an odd gesture of content.

"Dear friends," he said quietly, "happiness has come to me late, perhaps, but it is all the stronger for the waiting. For a quarter of a century I have known little of the joy I feel to-night. The castle is mine again; my Stradivarius, the friendship of people whom my ancestors would have been *proud* to know!" It was a very great compliment for the courteous old fellow to make, and Kirke thrilled. "And you," he added, "would have been glad to know them. Honour and truth and loyalty means the same to you as it meant to them! God is very good."

In the old-fashioned sitting-room of the villa with these loyal friends of the summer about him, Signore Lamberti presently took up his Stradivarius and rested his chin upon the red-gold wood with a gesture of reverence. As he raised the bow, Kirke glanced involuntarily at the picture of Camillo Lamberti behind the piano. The figures were identical! There was the same mystic fire in the dark eyes, the same surrender of the body to the call of an unseen spirit, the same powerful contrast of eyes and brows and hair. Gently the Italian drew the

bow across the strings in an improvisation quiet and restful. No hint of storms marred the tranquil melody. The strings were crooning a song of peace. Presently, however, the voice of the violin grew, grew to a powerful tone timbre that filled the old room with a wilder song and died away to a whisper of grief.

With an impetuous gesture the old violinist straightened his body and flung back his snow-white head; then the bow cleft the air and struck the strings again with startling suddenness, showering a passionate storm of melody from the wailing strings. The sparkle of sympathy, of fire, of a wonderful tenderness seemed to leap in a sobbing breath from the bow like an opalescent flame, gliding from agitated crescendo to whispering echo with the perfect play and blending of a rainbow. A mighty voice from the very heart of the old violin took up the plaintive song, a song of turbulence and revolt and a clash with warring Fate.

The Italian's eyes had closed now; his dark face, oddly picturesque beneath its crown of snow-white hair, was alight with feeling, and Kirke fancied he was playing the story of the summer, its tranquillity darkened at first by pangs of sorrow and later lightened by a great joy. The voice from the Stradivarius, so eloquent indeed that it seemed inspired by the soul of the great Camillo, sang of joy and of pain,

of love and passion, of the afterglow of sunshine that follows the storm, and Kirke's blood leaped in passionate response; then, in tones of infinite content, the improvised melody blended into the strains of the *Träumerei* and Kirke sank back in shadow.

One by one, as he lay back in his chair, the memories woven about the *Träumerei* rose before him in shimmering iridescence. The lawn beneath the elms back home where he had played it with Pietro's mournful eyes upon him; the dream chapel and the purple dusk with the oboe carrying the melody again to him across the lake; that first night here at the Lambertis' when he had played it at the old-fashioned piano yonder, his eyes upon the face of the girl who had inspired his picture; that other night in the gathering storm,— ah! yes, the melody had even crept into his picture of Nocturnia. Had he not whistled it even as he stood before the virgin canvas? The strains that were falling now from Signore Lamberti's bow like a shower of silver rain, had woven themselves into the line of his fate, and each recurrence of the melody had been an epoch in his life. With a sudden impulse he closed his eyes and lay back listening to the *Träumerei* as it softly closed the curtain of the waning summer.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LURE OF THE LAKE

THE music died away and a strained hush fell over the room, pregnant with appreciation. A little shaken, Signore Lamberti reverently replaced the old violin in its case. For the first time now with the witchery of its music gone, Kirke was conscious that Beatrice had slipped away from them, that the glimmer of her white gown was no longer visible in the shadowy corner by the doorway.

A wild hope flared up in the American's heart. Outside, the full glory of the southern moon mantled the cottage gables in a ghostly shimmer, subtly etching to his eager eyes a mirage of lake and cypress, of a chapel at the end of a dancing path of light, of a line of purple ridges capped serenely with the moon-fire. Had Beatrice too felt the lure of the moonlit lake, this call that had been surging so insistently through his own blood? Had the wail of the old violin brought to her, too, its throng of summer memories? If so — but Kirke's heart leaped queerly at the thought, and with a careless glance at the absorbed group about Signore Lamberti, he stepped quietly through the long

window at his side into the rose garden beyond.

But the old garden was empty, and with a sudden bounding of his heart, Kirke went hurrying on, on through the gardens and the hedge of fire to the road; on through the quiet valley to the moonlit lake. Long before he had reached the sombre line of cypress opposite the chapel, however, he had caught the sound of the organ dulciana,— so soft and clear and mellow that it seemed but a breath of elfin music sweeping faintly over the water. Faint though the echo was, it sent the blood rioting through his veins in a fever of hope, and then, of fear. Always Beatrice's music bore to him a winged message of her mood and to-night the ghost-like elves of melody might be unkind. Strongly caught in a wave of memory, Kirke hurried on to the lake shore, whimsically halting at the spot where early in the summer he had first watched the ghostly grey of the shadows and caught the blending sweep and play of the twilight music from the chapel across the way.

To-night, Kirke caught his breath at the utter loveliness of it all; the moon rode high above the water, flashing its brilliant lane of silver to the chapel wharf, touching the cross of gold among the trees with a skip and sparkle of delight. The silent ripple of the lake touched shores of ghostly velvet; but though the shadows that

lurked among the trees were sable, it was a sable oddly rimmed with quivers of light. Tree and mountain, lake and chapel, all lay in the tremulant heart of a radiance that to Kirke's eyes seemed supernal.

Still the faint echo of the dulciana, scarcely as audible as the murmurous lap of the water, but even as Kirke bent forward in an unconscious effort to fathom the mood of the music, the player opened the great diapason of the organ with a blare of trumpets and sent the full-toned crescendo echoing among the hills. Rumbling bourdon, reeds and trumpets, flying silver-winged across the lake! Dear God! what a pæan of triumph! To Kirke, subtly attuned to its stately imagery, it wove a mystic throng of pictures. Moonlight and music blended into a curtain of mystery that seemed to shroud the little chapel in an unreal haze, but through it flitted the colourful phantoms of another century, of Camillo Lamberti and his violin, of Antonius Stradivarius fashioning into immortality the magic wood that was later to claim the direction of Kirke's own life, of Niccolo Lamberti and the Golden Cross. Down through the centuries came the steady march of events, filing on to the climax of the summer; shadowy hosts of dead Lambertis flitted wraith-like from beneath the fingers of the girl in the chapel, crowding before the American's fascinated eyes in a pageant majestic

and picturesque, but as the song of the organ went on and on, the elves of melody subtly fell to interpreting the mood of the player with tantalising accuracy.

Triumph, exaltation, whispered the mocking elves; one caught the surge of them in every chord; but the lake memories — what of them? Surely they would have guided the girl's white fingers to the *Träumerei!* Surely, surely, if she remembered! but a great depression settled over the American at the thought, and once more the elves of melody fell to whispering in insistent mockery.

"Fool! Fool!" they derided. "She does not remember! Nocturnia and the moonfire, the storm and the Goblin on the Shore, they are nothing to her! Often before has she slipped away to the chapel organ to play away her moods; to-night the music of Signore Lamberti's violin was strongly emotional, and she is keenly alive to the stimulus of music as you know. It was that that called her to the lake and nothing more. The lure of the lake and memory? Absurd! Ever presumptuous, Sir Goblin, are you not with your lover's hopes and your lover's fears. Hear the rolling majesty of the organ trumpets! Is there aught in them of your beloved *Träumerei?* Nay, mad lover, staring away so gloomily across the lake, she plays but the song of the Conqueror who has climbed serenely

to the heights from the troubled valley of the summer!"

On and on went the maddening song of the Conqueror, full and rich and deep, with never a hint of the *Träumerei,* and the colour flared darkly in Kirke's face. The surge of a new bitterness was biting its way now into his own memories of the summer, for as the elves had said, she did not remember!

With a powerful crescendo, the song of the organ stopped abruptly, its echo rumbling distantly among the hills; a hush brooded for an instant over the lake, a strange hush of lapping water and rustling trees; then, from the moonlit chapel swept the tones of the organ flute high and sweet above the plaintive accompaniment of the reeds.

The *Träumerei!* With the opening strains, Kirke was on his feet, conscious of a burning wave that swept over him and left him dizzy and shaken. Long before the player had repeated the first strain, he was paddling rapidly across the lake in his canoe. The door of the little chapel was ajar, the dark head and white gown of the player, as they had been that first night months ago, faintly visible in the flickering light of a single altar candle. With the final chord of the melody, Kirke emerged from the shadows and approached the organ.

"You were ever fond of solitude, Lady of the

Lake," he said slowly, "and Goblins, I take it, were ever intrusive."

Beatrice turned with a start. Now, meeting the eyes of the American, a hot wave of colour swept over the girl's face to the line of her dark hair and Kirke guessed that the *Träumerei* of the organ flute had not been meant for the ears of an eavesdropper. Still with ready self-possession the girl smiled demurely, a hint of the old mockery flashing up beneath her long, dark lashes.

"You are bent upon startling truant Nereids, Sir Goblin!" she accused suddenly, moving swiftly toward the chapel door. "Dear me!" with a gleam of mischief flashing mockingly in her eyes, "I've forgotten the candle again!"

With an impatient shrug, Kirke retraced his footsteps, well knowing that the girl in a burst of wilful mockery was tricking him as she had before, that when, once more, he had reached the chapel porch he would find her gone. Still an odd sense of eventual victory, born perhaps of the organ *Träumerei,* burned steadily in his veins and sent him hurrying on from the altar to the empty porch and then on from the chapel to the water's edge where the lane of greenish-silver stretched across the lake from shore to shore.

Winsome, elusive Nocturnia! Once more her canoe rocked in a misty trail of moonlight but a few feet from the shore; once more the figure

that bent to the glistening paddle was alive with a beautiful insolence and mockery, and Kirke, staring out across the water, felt the power of words depart in an overpowering burst of memory. Fate had freakishly woven for him again the colour of a night long past, of a picture sprung from its vivid memory, a picture of moon-mist and shadow, of a boat of silver with a mocking pilot veiled in the mystic shimmer of the moon.

Unlike that other night, however, it was the girl's voice that first broke the silence.

"Why so very silent, Sir Goblin?" she called lightly.

"I was thinking," said Kirke, "that everything about the lake to-night seems wonderfully symbolic. The shore is thick with shadows, to be sure, but somehow they all seem like nothing so much as the velvet shadows of memory with which the lake for me at least is eternally fringed!"

"Ever fanciful, Sir Goblin!" mocked the girl.

"Ever fanciful!" nodded Kirke. "This trail of light at my feet is symbolic, too, I fancy," he went on insistently. "It is the forward stretch of my life,—alight with a new ambition and purpose. Oddly significant, is it not, that your boat rocks in the very heart of it, that the moon and the memories centre always upon Nocturnia! Indeed, I should say the moonlit radi-

ance of the forward stretch rests entirely with the wilful Queen of the Southern Night who may or may not as she chooses banish the brightness of the years ahead!" But Nocturnia's canoe, with a dip of the silver paddle, was darting swiftly away and Kirke's voice went as swiftly after her.

"Nocturnia!" he called.

"*Buona Notte, Signore Americano!*" came the mocking challenge over the water.

"Nocturnia!" he called again, a new note of mastery in his quiet voice, and this time the fleeing canoe halted uncertainly in the trail of moonlight.

"There is much news," he began. "Still," adroitly, "one can not call news over such a stretch of water."

There was a single dip of the silver paddle, a shower of glistening jewel-drops as it left the water, and Nocturnia's canoe glided but a few feet toward the waiting American and halted.

"News of what, Sir Goblin?" mocked the pilot.

"Of a picture very like the picture that the moon has etched to-night over the water."

Again the paddle struck the water with a dip and a flash and the dark, mocking face of the girl in the canoe grew frankly interested.

"Then it must be your picture of Nocturnia!" she said.

"Yes," nodded Kirke, "but even yet I cannot call such news so far! It is very wonderful news, Signorina, news of a letter from Paris, of —"

"Of what, Sir Goblin?" Again the canoe shot forward through the lane of moonlight and a little reluctantly Nocturnia came ashore.

"There are times, Signore Goblin," she said disapprovingly, "when you are very aggravating indeed! It behooves not a Goblin of the Shore to bribe a lake Nereid. The news, sir!" with an imperious flash of her dark eyes.

"And news of a Golden Cross!" finished the American, smiling, but even as Nocturnia's eyes flashed their warm message of congratulation, the girl herself had darted swiftly again toward the waiting canoe.

With a bound Kirke caught her hands and held them.

"No!" he said steadily, "you shall not go again. This time when you glide away across that trail of light, it shall be with me!"

"Sir Goblin!" stormed the girl, colouring, but the American was obdurate.

"I did not tell you all the symbolism of the lake, my lady of the Golden Cross!" he said slowly. "The shadows of memory that throng the lake shore to-night crowd about the figure of Nocturnia, to be sure, and every shadow is fringed with the radiance of love and hope. As

the lake-moon made Nocturnia the central figure of the picture and its inspiration, so to-night it etched a trail from shore to shore to prove to us both that Nocturnia's life-boat rocks in the very heart of my destiny."

"Months ago," flashed the girl mockingly, "I rocked so in my canoe beneath the moon and the message of the lake was nothing like so symbolic!"

"Ah, yes!" nodded Kirke quickly, "but then it was only a pale crescent of promise that hung above the lake. To-night the moon is at its full!"

There was infinite longing in his voice and Beatrice suddenly looked up. Now as the girl met the compelling gaze of the American, her beautiful armour of mockery and insolence fell from her like a tattered cloak. Once more a new Beatrice stood before him, a girl wonderfully sweet and winsome and alluring, with the painful memories of a troubled summer glimmering darkly in her lovely eyes.

"Oh, Kirke," she cried wistfully, with a little sob, "you are 'God's own lover,' I think! Always so punctilious and so courteous in all things, with only your eyes blazing their message for the world to read! Shielding me as you did that first night, fighting my battles here on the lake shore, ah, yes, I know!" With a wonderful radiance in her eyes, the girl's hands

crept to his shoulders. "Sir Goblin!" she said.

So, presently, they crossed the brilliant lane of silver together. And high above the water shone the Night Queen's coat-of-arms, an argent moon of promise in a field of stars.

THE END

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